Ved Mehta

FACE TO FACE



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For

MOTHER & FATHER

without whom not

F w u th gh gl d kly
b t then f t f w I k w p rt
b t tl h ll I kn w n l I m k wn

I CORINTHIAN 13 12

This entire book was dictated to my two fellow students JoAn Johnstone (Pomona 1956) and Grace Kestenman (Radcliffe 1957). My labour was made easier by JoAn's patience and understanding – not to mention her well-cooked lunches – and Grace's cheerful and alert personality. The devoted and unsparing work of Nancy Reynolds (Atlantic Monthly Press) was invaluable in preparing and brushing up the manuscript for publication. Another good friend to whom I am deeply indebted is my sponsor, for it was her timely and generous help that made it possible for me to write at all.

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Foreword

About three Christmases ago I was invited by a group of students to speak on India. "We want," the invitation read, "something with flesh and blood, something which is more than just a talk on day-to-day happenings in your country."

I rummaged through my file of previous talks, but none of them seemed to fill their order. The longer I sat by my Braille-writer the harder it became to produce what was required. I was about to write and decline the invitation when one of my friends suggested that I use the form of a fairy story but buttress it with real, live stuff. I returned to my Braille-writer and, beginning with the sentence "Once upon a time there was a salt march led by a frail little man", I constructed a success story of India's struggle for independence, complete with description, dialogue, action and pathos.

Full of trepidation I delivered my talk, but from the reaction it seemed that the teenagers had not lost their appetites for fairy stories. At the close of the discussion period a young lady on my right asked, "Have you ever written anything?"

From the back of the room a boy piped up, "It would be hard for him to write," an allusion probably to my blindness.

This challenge, along with that speech, was the germ of the present narrative. The real live stuff I knew best was my own experience, yet I realized even before I began to write (I was then twenty) that no one man's experiences or reflections were sufficient to justify or inspire a book. But India, where I had been born and brought up, was. In that land there were colour, splendour and pageantry, juxtaposed with tragedy, division and change. I was all too conscious of my own limitations, but with the resolve that everyone had to begin somewhere, I set [illegible] in 1954 and [illegible] to my own diversion.

I began by trying to re-create a ho ise of India with all its colourful awnings and portraits of family members servants and *pa d ts* and even the Kipl nglike curios which decorated the mantelpiece In a way it was eas er to build this house because its original had been drowned n the fast current of contemporary h story It seemed atu al then to go on to describe the whirlpool of eve ts wh ch had d vided my country

After the inte ve writing of that summer I went back to the routin of student until tw years later when with the kind co agem nt of Edward Weeks nd of Norman Cousins th project was e umed But bef re the book would be complete I woul l have to w ite a ect on on the United States where I had bee l ing f se n years

This I undertook with mixed emotions It would not be hard to rit about a c unt y to wh h I o ed o much – my education a d the us of th e y la guag which made this book pos ble And yet so many pe ple h d w itten about Ame ca and with a much mo e eloquent pen and percepti e eye than I could ever command that I w nde d if I had mu h to offer that was h and w th b g on a reader s bill of fa e Although the o pi t had to eflect la ger i ues, I decided that this final sh uld be wh lly personal i tone

And so I w ote about the exper ences of a boy totally blind set loo e alone th va t a d bustl ng United States at the age of fift en The th d p t then is th st y of the recept on p blems a d g owth of thi bl n l boy until he reached man hood and f th pleasures and warm frie dship he e perienced in th West Actually the na ative is a ucces on of images im s collect d f m old and new India – one eclip ed one ri i g – and f om Am ca as these images appeared to th t boy in the time of hi growth

I

INDIA & HOME

ONE

Surmas and School

In India as elsewhere every girl or boy has fond and warm memories of his childhood, from the day he begins to talk to his mother and father in broken syllables. Invariably a child learns and recognizes the faces of his mother and father, of sisters and brothers who play with him constantly, or the servants who prepare his meals or watch him play in a nursery strewn with knick-knacks and toys. He must also remember the rich colours of the butterflies and birds which children everywhere always love to watch with open eyes. I say *must* because when I was three and a half all these memories were expunged, and with the prolonged sickness (meningitis) I started living in a world of four senses – that is, a world in which colours and faces and light and darkness are unknown.

If my age and the length of the sickness deprived me of the treasured memories of sight, they also reduced things which are valued so much in the sighted world to nothing more than mere words, empty of meaning. I started living in a universe where it was not the flood of sunshine streaming through the nursery window or the colours of the rainbow, a sunset or a full moon that mattered, but the feel of the sun against the skin, the slow drizzling sound of the spattering rain, the feel of the air just before the coming of the quiet night, the smell of the stubble grass on a warm morning. It was a universe where at first – but only at first – I made my way fumbling and faltering.

It was good that I lost my sight when I did, because having no memories of seeing, there was nothing to look back to, nothing to miss. I went blind in November 1937. At that time we were living in Gujrat, in the province of Punjab in northern India. After my sickness we moved to Lahore, a few miles away, but the procession of relatives who came to sympathize made

my father ask for another transfer this time to Karnal where we had neither friends n r relati s There we got a cottage on the canal ba k built in very peaceful and quiet surroundings

As might be e pected in the beginning it as tough f r all of us – fo my mother and my father fo my th ee sisters and my brother and fo me too The illness had left me weak The ervants shi k d me a th gh I were an e il eye personified My sister t eat d m w th care a though I we e a fragile doll and my moth w pt My fathe who was a doctor in the public health ervice was g at f l that my spine had been tapped in time for d lay n the lumbar punctu e would ha e affected my mind r e dangered my l fe But he like the rest despair d

A stat f complete inactio therefore followed my bl ndness In part thi wa due t the immed at hock of the illness but mor mpo t t st ll the imp s was caused by ignorance of the pote t l ties f bli d child nce the only blind per ons my pa ents saw we e b ggars

But w by fate or by the will of God blindness had struck n t only a h ld of the w ll to-d but that f an excellently t a ed doct wh f und h t a ning thi instance useless ll his w d m d cal xperienc had pr p ed him for an ptan e f th tragedy a d he und tood that a y cou e of mu t begin w th the real zation that I would be blind for th rest f my l f

My m ther on the oth h nd ne ther would nor could c nvinc h elf th t my ight would never return she did not ha e the m d cal e per ce of my father a d she bl med som th ng in he p t for th tragedy

The fam ly *pa d t* p n whose advice mother had relied alm t fr m her hildhood wa alled in and c n ulted He know m r abo t rel g o and sci ce Mother said with prid th any ther *pa d t* i our province I was taken bef re him a d for a long tim I sat in my moth r s lap wh le h w l st i eflect n After a wh l he took my hand and tho oughly exam ed the l es Then he look d at Mothe s and h stud ed h f ehead mumbl g stead ly He aid he found himself inadeq ate, and mo e *p d ts* would have to be

consulted At his request, they were called and questioned exhaustively as to what atonement could be made Although their analyses and remedies differed considerably they all agreed that by doing penance for her sins my mother could improve my chance of regaining sight

They prescribed methods ranging from intensive prayers to strenuous physical exertions and for a fee they agreed to perform part of the necessary ritual Each *pandit's* advice was carefully heeded Since my mother knew that my father would scorn such methods she kept them secret making it doubly hard for herself

Along with this religious counsel was coupled a series of visits to *hakims* (physicians who followed the Greek or Unani system of medicine) These quacks prescribed all types of concocted drops to put in my eyes The *surmas* which were administered at all hours of the day and night burned and stung my eyes and the only soothing part of the otherwise miserable ordeal was the loving caress of Mother afterwards

One night when my mother was administering these eye drops, and I was protesting with loud cries my father unexpectedly returned He asked and I told him why I was crying He was outraged

He questioned Mother as to how long this had been going on, but she would not answer him She was prepared to bear any outburst silently and the longer she stayed silent the more irritated my father grew He said harshly that her superstitions far surpassed those of any village woman he had ever known He went on to say that any person with the slightest consideration for her husband would have readjusted her ways in ten years of marriage All his efforts to break her from her deplorable past had been in vain He did not want his children brought up in such a tradition

Even then she did not defend herself Just as my mother had silently suffered the verdict of my blindness the self abasement imposed by the *pandits* and the pleading which preceded the administration of my eye drops so now she suffered my father's anger quietly He forbade her to make any more visits to the

hak ms and strictly prohibited the purchase of any more *surmas* Then he gently lifted me from her arms and took me away W th steady hands he bathed my stinging eyes After tl is incid nt e en tho gh we t pped going to *hak ms* now and then appli at ons of *u m* continued until I was eleven But they we e very mild a d my moth r always obtained my consent in adva c

I rem mber othe little tests my mother put me through One day sh p ceived that ju t before I arrived at a closed door I w uld stop and reach for th handl to open it She began letti g m go about th house by myself and she di covered that I seldom ran int th ngs She c edit d the *hak m* and the sting ing drops but ve y e ening she would hold her hand up before my fa e a d ask me to tell her whe e it vas She used t shake he hand bef e me so that myriads of p es next to belo v and abo e my ear c uld feel h r ha d e e when it wa a foot away The air urrent helped me to spot it But she wasn t satisfied with this Sh want d me to t ll her wheth r the light was on or ff Wh I fail d thi test h was unhappy again but I soon c ght on and w uld l ten for the cl ck of th witch and then tell her Som times h would fl p the sw tch very rap dly time and aga and I w ld alway count the cli ks and gi her the ght nswer

The re so fo th onflicting approa hes of M ther and Father t w rds my blindn ss lay in ea h f the r backgr u ds My mother had me fr m a large middle-class family and h d th ee i ters and th ee b thers She was the elde t of the s sters, and at the time when h cam t attend school it was still customary for even th best-educated women to go only as far as the eighth gra l Thus her ed catio l ad ceased with simpl arithm ti and Hi d grammar F om that time until her marriage fi years l ter he had de oted herself to cooking sewi g and cari g f r he younger brothers and sisters Wh le these sk lls trai ed h to be an excellent mother they did not prepare her t cop rationally with an unfamiliar tragedy such as bl nd e She found the weapons of love and affection use less If he pampered me a her maternal instinct d ctated my

father would scold her, and if she tried to use the medical cures which had been practised and handed down from mother to daughter for generations, my father would forbid their use

My mother married my father when she was seventeen They had little in common for while my father had travelled extensively abroad and had moved in a society completely foreign to our native culture my mother had been brought up in the strict discipline of a very conventional Indian home In fact she had not even seen a white woman until she met one when in the company of my father My father was a very restless person, quick tempered and impatient He often went to clubs and dinners where English speaking people were present and he would return home late at night from the club where he had been playing a game of cards I think my mother must have felt almost as apart from him as if he were an Englishman

Then her first child had turned out to be a daughter much to the disappointment of her relatives and friends who blamed her for the miscarriage of their wishes The second also was a daughter and the third child was no more pleasing than the first two Some hints were made to give up since there seemed no hope of getting a son although in all fairness to my father, he seemed to grow more and more attached to Mother and home and he was very fond of all three daughters In fact, he spoiled them

At last a son came and the event was celebrated with great joy and festivity As an anti-climax to this addition I had arrived, and even more people with gifts had come to see me than had celebrated the birth of my brother Om Parkash

While my mother s parents had always lived in the congested city of Lahore in a comparatively middle class home, my father s childhood had been spent in the carefree atmosphere of village life His grandfather had been the leader of a village on the bank of the Ravi River In a small way, he had been a philanthropist and had been loved and revered by all the villagers At his death, he had given half his land to the Brahmans, and had left the care of the rest of his property to his eldest son

According to the village tradition the eldest son was charged with the care of the vhole family Thus my grandfather Lalaji was re ponsible for his two br thers families as well as his own f even ch ldren the ldest of his boys was my father Thes omb n d famili s formed one large household typical of the illage family system of I d a

Recalli g h xpe i nc s in thi family my fath r remarked It was a llage w thin a village He tells me that many relat ves used t m to v it them s metimes doubling the size of the hous h ld and that sit in those days as interpreted liberally People w uld stay f r m nth at a time while my grandmother and the gi l d d all the cooking Lalaji had inherited all the g ne o ity of hi fathe and wheneve any neighbours could n t afford g ocerie th y came t him He n tu n would send them to my g andm the Bhabij ho had somehow to pr v de f r th m On day my g a dfathe nt a eighbour to her in the m ddle of th m nth vhe uppl es were nea ly e hausted Bhab j kn w that sh had to m k the pro isi ns last u til the nd f th m nth a d t wa mpo sible to d o unles very grain wa n erved Sh xpla n d to the n ighbou that there was n th ng t p re but when Lal ji h ard of th he was enraged a d told Bl abij that there was alway plenty in his h m Wh r th re wa a shortage n the home it was the wom n f the immed at f milv who star ed

Of th s v ch ldren of the fam lv ix we e boys and Lal ji wa d t m d th t v ry o e f them should recei e a college ed cati n an e o b ta t amb ti n f a person w th limited mean in a ountry wh re e ghty f e per cent of the people are illiterate Wh n the ch ld en came of s hool age they started a tendi g a go ernment chool located two miles fr m the illage They h d to walk th s dista c after doing their chores each m n ng and on the way home they r ted under the trees to fin h th ir h mewo k

Lalaji never treate l them as child en but always a g own up and f om the time wh n he wa n ne years old my father was cha g d ith looking after h is younger brothers and s tting them a good example At the age of fifteen he entered Govern

ment College in Lahore for the premedical curriculum Two years later having passed the Intermediate examination he joined the King Edward Medical College in Lahore, where he distinguished himself both in scholarship and sports – a rare combination indeed

My father was very ambitious and independent In April 1919 when Gandhiji was arrested trying to enter Punjab in spite of the ban on his entry my father joined the college strike organized as a protest against this high handedness of the British therefore his merit scholarship was confiscated and he was dropped for a year Although my father s punishment was rescinded a few months later by the committee appointed by the government to review these punishments his scholarship was never restored

In 1920 immediately on obtaining his degree in medicine and surgery which entitled him to enrolment in the *British Medical Register* he proceeded to England for post graduate courses in tropical medicine and public health this my father did in spite of the advice of the Government Advisory Committee which doubted the possibility of admission of Indian students to the already crowded universities of Great Britain

My father was the first in the family to venture across the high seas All his relatives except Lalaji were opposed to his leaving for England They believed he would lose his caste and that such education was bound to change his way of life and destroy his native heritage He would certainly be a misfit in Indian society if he returned It was also argued that he might marry and settle down in England, which would prove disastrous to the education of his younger brothers, finally, it was considered most unwise to take the risk with the limited resources that the family had However he went

In England my father attended the University of London, completing his education in public health in record time He then returned to India and as he disembarked in Bombay, his younger brother, who had finished his medical schooling in India boarded a ship for England to receive the same training

My father took a job in the newly created Public Health

Department as a Municipal Health Officer Since he was the first to earn his living he not only helped his younger brothers but also contributed to the living expenses of the family In 1922 he was selected as one of the first Rockefeller Fellows to tour Europe and the United States and with this start he went on to a distinguished career in India His success enabled him to assist his brothers and his older sister's sons in completing their education From the very beginning Lalaji had indoctrinated him with the value of education and thereafter he never ceased to strive until all in his family who deserved an opportunity for education had received it

Although in my case there was an obstacle which seemed insurmountable, he was determined to leave no avenue unexplored He read all available literature on blindness He learned that almost all India's blind people had turned to begging for their livelihood or had become owners of *pan* and *biri* shops and spent their days rolling nut and condiment in a betel leaf or tobacco in a cigarette paper He was determined that this was not going to be the fate of his second son and he started corresponding with many of the prominent educational authorities asking their advice The replies were not optimistic For the blind educational facilities and personnel were limited and often the school became an asylum with all ages grouped together in a class without any gradation system

My father still persisted for he knew that my staying at home would result in over indulgence He realized as well that I would have difficulty playing with normal children and that my mother would always be afraid to let me leave the immediate premises

At last he heard of Dr R M Halder principal of Dadar School for the Blind in Bombay My father wrote to him asking advice. Dr Halder showed unusual interest in my case and promised to take special care and personal responsibility for me if I were sent to his school

When my mother learned of my father's decision to send me to the Dadar School she was appalled She had never been to Bombay and to her it might have been a foreign country

She could not understand the reason for sending me nine hundred miles away from home to attend school with orphans and children of the poorest classes After all, another year at home could not but help my development Yet she placed her faith in my father s superior judgement, and in her quiet way she acquiesced

On 15 February 1939 when I was almost five, my mother and father took me to Karnal station There I was to board a train for the first time, accompanied by one of my father s friends who was going on to Bombay When the whistle blew, my father said to me, Now you are a man Then he clasped my hands and drawing the palms together within his own, he murmured the Hindu blessing, *Namaste* I felt him lift me through the window as he handed me to his friend and I leaned out just in time to kiss my mother before the train started moving

It was an express train, and we covered the distance in a day and a half My remembrance of the journey is that I cried and slept intermittently, overcome by all the strangeness which surrounded me

My Cousin Prakash who was posted in Bombay met my train and we took a *tonga* from the station to the school I was over joyed to ride in the familiar horse-drawn carriage because it was something I could cling to from the past After about an hour s ride we slowed down and entered the congested smoke filled district of Dadar The rhythmic beat of the tramway bells the loud shouts of the conductors at each junction the irregular rumble of the wheels on the narrow rails stood in sharp contrast to the quiet murmur of the canal water near our spacious bunga low at home I was frightened and I begged Cousin Prakash to take me home We finally reached the gate of what Cousin Prakash described as a narrow three storey building, sandwiched between a cotton mill and a congested shop district. Now I was at school

It was about four thirty in the afternoon, and the students had just finished their tiffin Getting up from the floor, they

in her arms and kissed me She told me she was my aunt and Dr Halder my uncle, and she hoped that I would come to her just as I would to my mother I was to eat in their private dining room and not with the other children Then Dr Halder took me back to the dormitory where I waited the dreaded return of the students from the dining room

That evening a spring bed with a heavy mattress and a mosquito net was moved in and placed beside Deoji s From then on I was known as the boy with the good bed and soft hands Later Deoji put me to bed and tucked the mosquito net under the edges of the mattress I couldn t go to sleep, for the students were still in a fit of excitement over the arrival of a new student They talked about how gently Dr Halder had asked me to follow him and how neatly I was dressed Abdul still contended that my hands were like a girl s and that I had never worked Amidst this clamour was heard the loud coughing of Dr Halder and one of the older students shushed the others Dr Halder with quick, clicking steps walked into the room and turning off the light, reminded everyone in his shrill voice that it was time to go to sleep and that severe punishment would follow if he heard any commotion

The large, unfriendly room the distant voice of Dr Halder, and the huge bed seemed far removed from my cosy bed in my parents room but soon sleep overcame me

In the middle of the night I woke up sobbing and all the day s happenings came into focus Pressing my face against the pillow I cried silently Then I felt someone gingerly pull back the mosquito net It was Deoji I clung to my pillow I didn t want him to see me crying, but he gathered me up with the pillow

I was frightened suppose Abdul or Bhasker were to hear me? But Deoji carried me out of the dormitory and sat down on the steps Clumsily he rested me on the steps and asked me if he could do anything He did not wait for an answer and started telling me about how he had felt when he first arrived there. He told me that I would soon forget about home, and would find school a very pleasant place He described the

I had had to eat When I related to him my dinner of freshly baked white bread and Dr Halder s favourite mutton dish, he sniffed sarcastically, and calling to his friends repeated the menu as indicative of my *pampered* effeminate ways

In a tantrum, I cut his cane chair Then I hid while he clumsily hunted for me I was afraid Tarak Nath, who was Abdul s best friend and known for his meanness would disclose me to him but fortunately for me, and to his lasting credit, he stuck to the rules of fair conduct namely, that no half sighted person should interfere in the fight of two blind people

Abdul strained to hear my breathing or light movement, but I silently tiptoed amid his characteristically vulgar profanity, to the dormitory and Deoji Thereafter I earned respect and a particular following of my own

Aside from these personal adjustments in my first few months there I had to learn much about discipline I had to make my own bed, and my first experience made me appreciate the value of having no mattress and no mosquito net I had to sew on my buttons, polish my shoes, eat at regular times and get up at the sound of the bell As I grew more accustomed to the school life, the routine became easier

After five months of school when I had just about got settled the summer came and it was time for me to return home Cousin Prakash came to get me, and together we boarded the train for Lahore, where we were now living since my father had been promoted and transferred in my absence I expected that the noise and lively activity of the school would soon be replaced by a grieving silence, and I was filled with a longing to leave the train and return to school Recalling my mother s pain and anguish after my blindness, I was ashamed of not wanting to go home, yet already I preferred the new taste of in dependence in school, and even the taunts of Abdul seemed more bearable than my sheltered, uneventful life at home

Realıty and the Dream

My parents met me at the stat on and I found my mother very cheerful h was o enjoy d at my return and the same light hea tednes greeted m at ou home There was the infectious laugh of sit Umı to be lear ed the mot t and warm hand of sister Nimı to rediscover I had also to get used to taking o der from si te Pom who was seco d in command to Mother All th se si t s pressed m about my doı gs at chool and I repe tedly arrat d to them a l their friends my encounter with Abdul Th y were amu ed that I had succes fully defied an older boy a l they were touched when I told them about Deojı

In the morning it felt wonderful l pp ng my small hand into my mother b g one and running bes de her alm t at a trot for the family *h lu a* A w nea ed the c nfectioner there voul l be the mell of the teamı g pots the low and d libe ate n ise f larg poon st r ing the syrup and an aromatic smell of fre hly bak d hot weetmeats At the shop which jutted out on the street l ke a stand Moth r would l ft me and place my hand on th *th l* – the larg platters whı h held a va iety of roa ted nut and sweetm ats f d ffe ent izes a d hapes Wh le my lung breath d in the *hal* air and the old *h lwa* with rough and tubby hands ga e me sampl to ta t and Mother held me loo ely in he arm so that I could l an way over I felt like a p ı ce

Sometimes Mother left me to go to the hop across the street and the *h lu a* w uld l t me sit with him on the platform crowded w th *thal* a d say Sahib y u have the nose the mouth and the ear all cut out to be a *h lua* You just ne d a b gger st mach I would pick up one b g piece after an ther with my sticky hands and put it into my mouth all at once I

thought the *haluan* was princely We would return home with enough sweetmeats for me to open a small shop in my nursery room for my sisters and brother Om

In the evening there were always the walks to Lawrence Gardens with its small mounds carpeted with lush grass and the rich sounds of children running and playing hide and seek, and the merry go-round turning swiftly and the seesaw thumping against the ground I ran and played too but one of my sisters always had to be at my side The Carry Home ice-cream man seemed to be present everywhere peddling his product in small cups which my sisters would let me stuff in my pockets The open air of the huge gardens felt wonderful after Dadar So did the care of the servants who made my bed and polished my shoes, and the gentle hand of Mother who bathed me I was glad Abdul was not there to see all this

The summer ended and once more my father clasped my hands and said Namaste Mother kissed me and I started for Bombay with another of my father s friends

In my second year at school I was old enough to have my own little plot of land, where I planted vegetables and I spent my spare time as did everyone else, caring for them I had also begun learning multiplication and division on an arithmetic slate and reading and writing Braille in English – at that time there was no uniform Hindi alphabet for Braille. I learned that each of the letters in Braille was formed by various combinations of six dots The Braille typewriter had only six keys

Since I was slightly healthier now, I began to take part in more games Our games differed little from those of normal children, with the exception of running Behind the cotton mill was an empty lot where half a dozen wires about a hundred yards long were stretched between poles We had our races there, running with strings attached to rings on the wire This turned out to be quite a competitive sport, for the winner received not only prizes but recognition from the other students Although we practised every day, the real contest was held every two months between students of the same size We would all line up on one end of the stretched wires and Dr Halder

would give each one of us a biscu t When he said Go! we had to finish the b scuit before beginning to run If at first I could not un as fast as Bha ker I could outdo him in eating the biscuit and get a head start on him I came in first in the fall contest Organized tug-of war and a ball which had bells inside pro ided u w th other phys cal activity Draughts or cl equers chess and .ard games form d our indoor sports

Thi routine coupled w th good friends should have mad any ne happy But w th the comi g of war p ices had gone up and th food at the H lders had g own steadily worse Hard pressed be u f their l w salary they had to conserve their food and besid s item like butter an l meat were already being ratio ed This fact plus the wet and oppressive climate of B mbay and my run-down phy ical condition c nsp red to m ke me spend almost half my three years the e in a hospital w th every d sease of ch ldhood including mala ia and typhoid

Start ng w th th s eries of illnesse I re ollect little more than vague imp es on f a hosp tal and sev re fe er and all the fresh e pe ience of th early months at Dadar which ha e left a lasting impres i n n my m mory begin from he e on to be jumbled i t a world half-d eam half real Each month my vi it t th hosp tal i creased not o ly in frequency but also in duratio until the ho pital became h me wh le the school became a str nge llu ory place There s a sharp memory of someo e fee l ng m with a sticky poon soft bo led egg wh ch went bad in my hot a d dry mouth and it turned my st mach to wallow them I ne er wanted soft bo led egg never again I ecall, too my expe tant waiti g for my pa ents and the repeated disappointment wh n they d d not appear When I a ked whether they ha l been info m d of my illness the answer was always evasi e

Danger of death d dn t seem too far away in that desolate hospital where again doctors and nurses became my sole gu dian and a untru tworthy barr r at best again t another tragedy There wa on comfort a n se wh se name I can ot recollect Neith er do I recall her voice. Yet from the memory of

her affection and kindness, I can readily reconstruct a clear, revealing image.

I remember she would come to visit me in her off hours, and even if I were asleep she would sit and watch over me When I awoke, she would tell me stories of her childhood and amuse me Then she would be talking about prayer, and of some figure in the distant past She would ask questions about my mother and sisters, and would assure me they all loved me, that even if they were not present their thoughts were with me Each time I sneezed she told me that it was the surest indication that they had been talking about me just then, and that if I thought of them at once, they would sneeze too She said she was a Christian that she would pray to her God and that I needn t worry Her God she said had always looked after the sick and uncared for, and no miracle lay beyond him She would bring me fruit, and even sweets if I were well I have often asked myself if I ever even thanked her Probably not After a while I took her just as much for granted as a chair or a bed, and never once thought of her not being there For me the hospital be came her, and all my previous dread of that place left me

When I returned to school I found that my energy had been sapped, and that I tired easily I was ashamed of this and dreaded the play hour, knowing that I couldn t keep up with the others

One day two boys were swinging on the single swing Stand ing on the seat, they pumped until the chains squeaked shrilly with the motion and I could tell they were swinging quite high They had been in the swing long past their turn, and despite all my pleading for fair play they would not stop I ran to grip the chain When they heard me coming they jerked the chain from my reach by throwing themselves to one side Furious at my own lack of proficiency I moved closer, only to collide head on with the seat After that, I remember Dr Halder s arrival, the ambulance, and waking up to the familiar odour of the hospital disinfectant, which seemed less pure than the curling fog which hung over Dadar playground

When I awoke, my nurse was not there Disturbing rushed through my mind Had she left the hospital,

certain I vould not return? Humiliated at my own pride I remembered she had other patient Yet all of a sudden the same fear and d pa I had xperienced on my first night at Da lar S.h ol returned

Weak f om the blood I had lost and exhausted by my dire thoughts I lay there half awake Then I heard those soft yet de isiv f t tep t wh h I had g o vn a cus omed and she was there I clung t h r nd wept

Thi a de t was mply an interlud between one series of illn sses nd an ther Dur ng all these illnesses she talked to me about being good and praying but she never explained to my at sfacti n what Christianity was She always said that I was too yo ng ar d I vould learn and unde stand some day I d not kn v if t was she but to someth ng or someone must be att bu e l my lasting nte e t in thi religion and its con t uous sour e f inspirat n

When I retu ned to Dadar S hool I ask d Deoji about it and he told me he was a Ch st an too and added that the Halders we e also He told me that Dada S hool wa founded by American m ssionarie and that I woul ln t be there if it hadn t been for them I a ked him f they were anything l ke the nurse I kn w and he t ld me judging f m my d s ript on they we e H taught m an Engli h prayer which I repeated e ery night before go ng t l p

H a ly F th hou wilt hea me
Bles thy l ng h ld t ght
Tl ough h d k ess be th n a m.,
F p m f t ll m ng l ght

All h d y thy h d h tl l d me,
And I th k thee f r tl e
Th u h t l th d me w med me, fed m
Listen t my even g prayer

Le my s be all f rgi n
P th f t d I l e so well
T ke us ll at l st to h aven
Happy there w th th e to dwell

Since at my home no discussion had centred around religion, I only knew I was a Hindu and no more I prayed of course but they were only simple requests and I had not learned to form an impressive prayer like the one Deoji taught me Deoji also found for me some little stories about Christ which he translated for me, and before I left Bombay I was able to read them in Braille by myself

While thus indirectly I was learning about the Western religion, so too I was being inspired to go across the sea into another land Dr Halder who had attended Harvard University, had visited the Perkins Institute near Boston (which today is still the foremost institution in the education of the blind) and was endeavouring to construct a small replica of it in Bombay At the dinner table he often spoke of Perkins and of America and one day even asked me if I would like to go there and suggested that this was my father s wish My father s enthusiasm for the West and Dr Halder s encouragement were enough to implant in me the desire to travel A week after my seventh birthday in March Dr Halder took me to two of his friends a Mr and Mrs Thomas who were planning a voyage to America in the summer of 1942 Dr Halder told me it might well be that I could go with them to the States and that he would ask their consent

When Mr and Mrs Thomas decided to take the responsibility and when they told me of the two-month voyage on the ship I was thrilled at the prospect Dr Halder followed up this visit with a letter to Dr Farrell director of Perkins Institute on 19 April, 1941 Counting out the time for my illness and vaca tion at home, I had attended classes for only one year, and it was on this attendance that he based his recommendation Since this letter was decisive in shaping my dream to come to America, I quote the important excerpts in full

> The boy has been in the school for about a year only We do not have standardized mental tests to give the child but basing on his responses and my observations during the period he has been w[illegible] us I have a feeling that probably he is a superior child He is much interested in physical activities as well I should like

th t he g ts an opportu ty to be d cat d n th best institution in th world in l f m t ve a d m t mpre nabl year H s father chos o r school t B mb y th ugh goo m l s aw y fr m h m a he th ught th t th h ld would h e th b t pportun t s of education they ar l bl n Ind We r teach ng h m th ough th m d um f Engl h d n Ind n erna ular H unde tand E l h a d n w t the H ll Bra ll Typewr ter When he j d th hool h d d ot k w a wo d in Engl h No h has a w kabl oc b l ry f m th z w rd

While I wa too young to be acquainted with the full content of th letter or und r tand its gnifican I did however catch fr m D Halder that enthu a m for an ocean voyage and a new c untry

Dr Halder wa t ll a ry young man and dedicated to impr ing th condit on of the blind and if it happened that I should g t Am ca and return to India conversant with the m re progr W ste n attitude about this handicap I m ght ll help t ch ng the urse f Ind an thinking about blindn and ind ctly h lp Dr Halder accompl sh his aim

At that tim Dr Hald r was in the process of ompleting a book on analy ing h d eams of the v sually handicapped It wa to be an bje t e tudy a to h w the d ams f the blind d ffered f m th e of th ghted and he asked u students to help h m by retell g ou dreams to him ea h morning For each d eam o ectly reconstructed f r him we would be given a pi c of candy

I used to and st ll do have numerous dreams While I re frain d f om tell ng h m all my dreams I remember however g ng int his offi and relating a dream that I was going to England w th the Halders There wer details about the ship and sea on wh ch h quest n d me clos ly for the theme of h whole book wa to d sc er how blind people pictured their surroundings Did they for n tance see a tree with all its lea es and sp eading bran hes or w uld they only experience it in its tall stark tructur ? Since my ual memory previous to blindness had been completely obliterated because of the long

illness, my experiences in the dreams did not differ from those of waking hours

A month later Dr Farrell of the Perkins Institute replied, but he did not agree with Dr Halder that my most formative and impressionable years should be spent in the United States He strongly recommended that I should not leave my home environment He said that his experiences with those coming from the East at an early age to study in the Western world indicated that there was a grave risk of becoming total misfits in Eastern as well as in Western cultures Dr Farrell mirrored, as we were later to learn, the attitude of almost all the Western educators, and Dr Halder realizing this let the matter rest, and with this vanished my dreams about an immediate visit to America

I continued my studies at the school for another year and a half, and within two and a half years I had absorbed all the school had to offer To be sure if I wished to make caning chairs my profession I could have continued there and specialized in that work but academically Dr Halder considered my studies there completed He wrote to my father to say that since no immediate provisions could be made for my trip abroad the time could be more valuably spent at home rather than at another boarding school What I needed most he said, was family life

In spite of climate illness and food Dadar School and Bombay had become home for me As I boarded the train bound for Lahore, I went with anguish and apprehension I tried to remember Panjabi and couldn t Indeed I had a more workable vocabulary in English I was no longer even a Hindu, for Deoji had convinced me that I was at heart a Christian I thought and thought, trying to reconstruct the image of my family from their voices but their voices were muffled and distorted, and echoed faintly in the corridors of time and distance

I leaned forward, and tried to shut out the distracting and exasperating noises around me but in vain It seemed as though I were going to a place where nobody understood or even knew me I had no friends in my family for my friends were to be found in the nurse, in Deoji, the Halders, and my class mates

Yet no one sympathized with me and even the Halders were astonished by my apathy

And then the compartment jarred and I knew I would soon hear that definitive sound of departure as the train moved away from the station It would overshadow even the loud pleas of the hawkers who clung to the train Slowly the train pulled away as the wheels shrieked on the permanent way and with their turning completed a circle of my life

THREE

Mehta Gullie

THE whole family met me at the Lahore station, and their happiness over my arrival was radiant and infectious I soon forgot my apprehensions in that vivacious atmosphere

Since our own house, which had been built a few years earlier, was being repaired, we moved in with my mother s family, where the whole lot of us were crowded into two rooms But the cramped quarters were scarcely noticed by us children, since we spent all our waking hours in the Mehta *Gullie* and returned home only to sleep The Mehta *Gullie* or street, was separated from the main house by a five foot wall

Climbing this wall we would find ourselves in a completely different world, for behind it and within a radius of two city blocks lay the houses of all the Mehta families comprising a clan of some fifty persons These houses opened on the *gullie* which was off the Temple Road and formed a square Our house was not included in the square since it had been built before the planning of the Mehta *Gullie* but it was only a block away

There were many Mehta children, and all of us played together, but the family which was closest to us was that of my father s younger brother who had received the same medical training as my father, and now worked in his department He had five children, and they were about our age and had the same interests, although unfortunately there was no playmate for my baby sister Usha, who was born while I was away The two older daughters, Shil and Lil went to the same school as my sisters Pom, Nimi and Umi All of them played on the same ball team and often had the same assignments Yog their younger brother, who was three years older than Om, was the first boy in this generation of the Mehta families, and whenever we played

any game he was the leader He chos the games and called the terms and became the referee in any controversy

Kite flying was the popular sport at this time and while the girls kn tted and sewed we boys climbed the roofs to enter the comp tition We had limited pocket money and it was not enough to buy all the mat ials we needed to make our kites but with *do* (a strong thread) we could cut other kite strings and try at least to appropriat the fallen prize During the day someone was ure t fly a high kite and as soon as it wa spotted other kites w uld go up to tangle in battle Often three or four were hooked t gethe and with strong thread and the right pull a heavy k te could ut the snarl and brin, them all plu ging to the st et Yog posted us all at diffe ent stations and as soon as a string wa brok n a long cry of *Bow-c tt* would esound to our po t All eye w uld focus kywa d and we would try to f llow the dir ction of the cra hi g kites E eryone would rush t find th fallen booty and som times a bitter struggle would follo The l s f fair play wer that no one was to snatch a k te once som one had placed both hands n it but the ules were often brok n. In th ambl wh ch f ll wed the kite s hitting the ground mo ften than not a kite w uld be t rn but some times one party was able to take t undamag d During the rush to f llow the k t w jump d fr m o oof level t the next a d each m n looked out o ly for him lf My enthusiasm would ne r all w m to stand st ll wh le the others rushed to each the priz and I would foll w the sound

Sometime one of th kite hunte would f rb d me to follow him Stay there he w uld shout I ll be back in just a moment But othe times boys t ied to help me and took my h nd v h l ru ning I sc ned th se gestures because they a noyed me and interf d with the game Soon in the scramble of the play my handicaps indeed ev n my existence, were forgotten a d with very occasio al ex eptions I was subject to the same rules and same fights Though with this complete f eedom came i jurie I d d de elop bett r co-ordi tion

On e though I came close to a very d sast ous fall I remem ber my sisters wat hi g the ru h and horrified to see me

clambering from roof to roof, shouted that I must stop Conscious of their attention, I thought of where I was, lost my nerve and sense of balance, and started sliding on the tin roof Luckily, the sloping roof flattened to a three inch ledge at the sides giving me enough pause to regain my balance and miss the two-storey fall When my mother learned of this incident, strict orders followed, forbidding me to take part in further activities I was, she said, to stay with my sisters and let them watch over me, and all my entreaties were ignored in my own best interests I grew irritated and sullen, and my father, noticing this, finally resolved to let me learn my own lessons the hard way He advised Mother not to be overly cautious With this I gained my liberty and returned to my playmates

I would often not see my mother from early morning when we congregated for sports, until dusk We were served food at whichever house we happened to be during the lunch hour, and my oldest sister, Pom, who was thirteen and who might as well have been Mother, saw that we were washed and clean We all obeyed and respected her for she was the only orderly influence in our disorderly group Just as Yog was chief in the boys games she led the girls, but when we played together she was the undisputed head

We returned home only in the evening with healthy appetites for our eight thirty dinner but the dinner was not very leisurely, since there was yet another treat at the Mehta *Gullie* before bed We assembled, tired and for the first time content to be still in the room of Bhabiji my father s mother To drowsy but eager listeners, she told stories stories which sparkled with her vivid narration Sometimes they were about life on the farm when Lalaji was alive, and how the gathering of all the families made each dinner like a festival More often, however she told us tales with a simple moral, which had been handed down like Aesop s fables She would vary these with tales about the dishonest shepherd who called Lion too many times or of the farmer who gave his life to save his family and stories about Ram and Sita, the personifications of virtue – Ram and Sita were held up to us as models of manhood and womanhood We were touched

and moved by their courage against the infamy of Rawan and they h gh lighted for us always the struggle between good and e l and the triumphs of courage and sacrifice over greed and wickedness After listening to these reminiscences and folk tales we would eturn h me refreshed and promise ourselves to live up to the ideals of Ram and of S ta But the next day we were fighting again over the fallen kites

When were till li ing in our grandparents compound my f ther went on an inspection trip and took Mother leaving u in th charge of sister Pom Once during our parents absence our g andfather turned from his evening v alk and when brother Om teased him for the prom d sweets he tapped him on the back with h cane Brother Om thought th s punishment unjust si c my grandfather had promi ed him a bag of hard orange cand s I was w th si ter Pom when b other Om came to her crying and t ld her Grandfather beat me

Si t r Pom was en aged for our parents had never b oken a pr m se She g thered us together a d aid we were no longer to li e with our grandpare ts and tolerate uch insults We were t pack our bel ngings and leave that ve y night No one asked her where w were going but we gathered our c mbs and w sh cloths a d soon we we e on the road

Hold ng each the s hand we drew courage and resisted our tea s In ti t ly we turned towards Lawrence Gardens whi h w had s ted many tim s on eve ing v alks It was about a m le away and as we got farther away from Grand father s hou e I wish d that sister Pom had let me tell someone we were lea ing Then at least, there would have been a hope of ur g andparents plead ng and maybe Grandfather s apologizi g – and the we ould have stayed there without having our dig ity out aged

We reached Lawrence Gard n around eight o clock and the clean, fresh air f om the thick tall grass which carpeted th h lly acres had a revi ing influence. Si ter Pom bought us all a cup of Carry Home ic cream wh ch she said hould take ca of our d n er Then we sat down in on c rner u der the tall wide spreading trees and prepared to spend the night As it

grew dark, all sounds subsided, and only the persistent chirp of the crickets remained to keep us company In our intermittent drowsing we heard the striking of nine ten, ten thirty

Then to my relief, I heard the faint, familiar calls of one of the servants who had often accompanied us to this favourite spot We were all awake now The party edged closer, and the shouts grew louder still sister Pom didn t say anything I wanted to shout back Here we are but dreading sister Pom s reproach, I didn t Even when they spotted us with the help of their torches sister Pom sat there immobile

My uncle, who accompanied the party, scolded us for leaving and causing so much unnecessary concern For all they knew, all six of us might have been kidnapped But seeing his scolding was having no result he paused and stood there silent, looking at us Then he gently suggested Let s go home But not until he assured sister Pom that Grandfather would make his apology to brother Om did she agree We joined our hands, and with Uncle and servants trailing headed towards our Grandfather s house in the Mehta *Gullie*

At the Foot of the Himalayas

In September of 1942 my father was promoted and transferred to Rawalpindi whi h was o hu dred and ighty m les north of Lahore At first th e wa talk of only my fathe going to Pindi nd the re t of th family staying behind in Lahore whe e my si ters were a'l en olled n an x elle t conve t But from the very outse e k ew the fall cy of this arrangement We had been l s ly kn t family a d from the very beginning my fath r belie ed n hom educat on just as much as in academic a d h h m lf play l an mp tant part in th s So ithout any further argum nt it v d cided to lea e Lahore With n a week of h rder my fath left and in arly 1943 when I w) t n w s ted f Pindi a city with excellent cl mate be i g he u n m f gateway to Kashmi leaving behind own h m th *gull e* kit s and Bhabiji

In Pu jab al e whe e more I dian were to be found in the higher il er i than in any other p o i e re ent d elop m nts had made po s ble the ele ati n of an Indian to the posit on of A i an Dire tor of Public Health My father because f hi eniority and education had rece ved th s j b in P nd and with it th di idend f a hou e Here a in other b g cit e the g) ernment had rese ed areas fo the homes of h gh r e hel n in the il ser e v h in th old day used t be Engli hm n We wer d lighted by the big g vernment bungalow vith a bu lt in office f my fath r While the house was in place a l tl d lap dat l the e en ac e e ate was excellent f r a g hi ken and buffaloes – our greatest source of m k and we w_re able to bu ld a pool f the a ommodation

thirty g ldfi h Fo a whil w e n kept a cocker pa l W h our fam ly an mal farm and the six ervants plus the *dh b* our laundryman and *chonk d* or caretaker we had a

holding comparable in dignity to that of any other official in the Indian Government.

By regulation of the government the road traffic of Civil Lines the district where we lived was limited and for miles around it was quiet The sticky heat of Lahore and the smoke filled Dadar district seemed almost grotesque in comparison with this natural setting The cold and pricking wind which grazed the icy peaks of the mountains swept down over Rawalpindi bringing the vitality and vigour of the Himalayas I had never felt more exhilarated, or healthier The vivacity I had experienced flying kites and jumping roofs returned afresh

The rest of the family were happy too My sisters learned that there was a Presentation convent here as fine as Sacred Heart at Lahore. My brother was admitted to a good school also and my mother was happy to have buffaloes of her own

We continued to live at Civil Lines until October 1945 and those three happy years stand out in my mind as a buffer between my stay in Bombay and the break up of India

For the first time now I noticed how smoothly the difference in my father s and mother s attitudes towards my blindness had been bridged My mother encouraged me to play and run as I chose and to go on excursions wherever I pleased in the district. I was no longer pampered One day when I had not eaten my meal Mother gently scolded me, and then she gave me a banana to compensate for the small lunch I told her I would eat it in a minute, and no sooner had she left the dining room than I turned around to offer it to our little cocker spaniel puppy Blackie. She swallowed part of it, but spat up the rest and there was no hiding what I had done I was given a thrashing that day and made to clean up the mess However much I valued my independence I did like the pampering too but I was learning that my mother had decided to treat me according to my choice of independence

My sisters treated me with no more deference than did my mother In the past they used to buy me sweets with their own pocket money and at the table whenever there wasn t enough of some tasty dish, I had priority But not any more. In fact I

have a sl ght suspicion that the s veets they bought with my own pocket money we e not alv ays all delivered to me I wa not even i dulged a the youngest Usha had replaced me in this advan tageou positi n

The Presentation con nt was located about two miles a vay from our h me and at first this seemed to be at a proh bitive d stance becau e my father couldn t take time off from his wo k to d ive my ist s there After consultation it was decided to buy each of the girl a bicycle Fo the pa t five years the women n I dia had enjoyed increasing ndepende ce thanks to the nature f Mahatma Gandhi s campaign still not many women had taken to riding bi ycle by th mselves on the streets

Sin e br ther Om s b cycl as falling apa t he was given a ne v one al I pre ailed upon my father ot t d p se of the o br the Om had utg own and t t k me many days l a ni g by tr l and r t r pa r th t b ycle With an occa nal directio f m a se ant I kept on working at it unt l I h d th wheel t aighte d out put n w pokes in them a d e n pla d th eat Aft th s bi ycle had bee my toy f r almo t m nth and a half and I had w ll spotted my cl thes with grea e it a fit to be put n the ro d on e ag in

Now I sta ted l arn ng how to r d it This wa ery diff cult sinc I was afra d t a k anyo to teach me for fear the bicycle would be taken away from me as being too old and dange ous Each m nt g I wo ld le e home a l try to r de it i the compou d No oon would I beg n th n I would fall and would hav to pe d tim n t o ly h d ng minor i ju ie but f i g th bicycle But g adually I lea ned to balance myself and falls came l freque tly

One mo ning when n y ters w re ridi g to school I decided that I would try to foll v th m keep g at a safe dist nce I k w the s e ts would be empty at that early hour a d nothing wo ld confu the sound f my si t talking to one another in the quiet f the m ni g I wa su e I coul l t ke my d ectio from th r ces At first everyth ng we t just as I had imagi ed W didn t meet with much traffic and in spite of occas nal

difficulties in hearing my sisters when they turned a corner, I followed them right up to the gate of their school

Even if I had been concentrating on remembering the turns of the twisting road, it probably would have been impossible for me to find my way back As it was I was afraid to disclose myself to my sisters by shouting I lost my nerve and while I was still thinking about what to do they were out of reach, inside the schoolyard

Then I heard the bells and the retreating laughter of the girls as I walked around the wall outside the school I thought about the Dadar School Its wall had been high and impressive too, and no one inside the wall paid too much heed to what went on outside Even the bells seemed to fit the atmosphere They sounded much like the church bells I had heard on Sundays at Bombay

I put my bicycle near the wall and sat down beside it on a patch of grass leaning my back against the wall When I was not dozing I let my thoughts drift After what seemed a long while the noon hour arrived I heard the noise the laughter and the playing of games I knew I was the only boy in that whole feminine vicinity, and I felt quite out of place I wondered how it would be to find myself back in Bombay competing in races and swinging on swings How noisy that place sometimes had been! Abdul? He seemed nicer now I longed to be back there. Soon the girls play hour was over and they returned inside But my thoughts lingered on

I awoke with a jar the bells were ringing three It must be *time for them to come out I thought*, and I picked my bicycle off the ground and stood up When my sisters arrived, they were astonished, and I was overwhelmed with their questions – how I had got there, what I had been doing all day, why I hadn t told them But I was saved the embarrassment of answering because their questions followed in such quick succession Then we started on the journey home, and this time sister Nimi kept one of her hands on my handle bar as we rode alongside each other All the time I was thinking of what my mother would say, and I dreaded her reproaches

shops, and in the village huts Thus I came to know a point of view completely different from my own family s

Even when we were not on tours I would spend hours in Ram Saran s quarters, talking to him about the war His quarters were a very small room located at the very farthest end of our estate Stretching my arms, I could almost reach from wall to wall of his room, and the length was not much greater Yet within that room Ram Saran cooked slept and kept all his belongings On one side stood his small cot which just fitted in the length of the quarters and I remember wondering what Ram Saran would have done if he had been one of the Sikhs six and a half feet tall At the other side of the room was built a small *chula* a charcoal burner over which he did all his cooking I would often visit him in the evening during his off duty hours and while I sat on a small board, leaning against the cot he would cook and now and then I could persuade him to let me taste one of his pancake like *rotis* if I promised not to tell my mother

Ram Saran hated Britishers and he said the British officers whom my father had replaced used to return from their clubs at all hours of the night In spite of being off duty he would have to stay up waiting for their return for frequently they would be quite unable even to unlock the door Ram Saran, retiring after he had seen them to bed would still be expected by the clerks to be on time next morning for his office duty, for he had to please the clerks as well as his officers

Then Ram Saran had no use for war The prices had gone up his salary had not He was having a hard time and he attributed all this to the British Government He was a great admirer of Subash Chunder Bose, for he was sure Bose had acted rightly in starting the Indian National Army on the Japanese side and trying thus to undermine the British Ram Saran had no doubt in his mind that the Axis powers would be victorious He could read Urdu very well, and each evening he would run down to the home of one of his friends who subscribed to a morning Urdu paper and bring it to his quarters While I sat he would read me the pro-Nazi paper, and I was very much

careful with the clothes, and had never received any complaints As the prices had risen, they had to take more and more customers which forced them to work as fast as they could from early morning until late at night Her daughter, while ironing an expensive *sari* had scorched it badly that very afternoon they had gone to the customer and reported the damage but the customer had been furious and had refused to accept the *sari* Now the *dhobi*s family was expected to make good the loss A hundred and fifty *rupees* she said Where can we get the money? We won t make that much in two months time I was moved and feeling helpless and awkward without even saying a word of consolation I left

I told Ram Saran about it and asked what I should have done but he added to my discomfort by remaining silent I couldn t approach my mother for it seemed it was becoming a habit with me to tell her some new sad tale each day and then try to enlist her help for the *mali* our gardener or the boy who took care of the cows So next day I asked sister Pom who kept all our money to give me all my savings five *rupees* at the time She wanted to know why, but according to the rules she did not insist and gave me my money I put it in an envelope and asked Ram Saran if he would take it to the *dhobi* s family but he did not want to take the responsibility He said some day my mother would find out, and might think he had encouraged me, and all my assurance to the contrary had no effect Finally I took the envelope and gave it to the youngest in the family who was only five and asked him to give it to his mother Next day the envelope was returned to my mother and at the dinner table she questioned me I disclosed the whole matter and to my great relief, all my family seemed to be as touched as I had been All my sisters as well as my brother were willing to pool our savings and give them to the *dhobi* s family, but my father said he would look into it himself and that we need not worry

When I saw the *dhobi* s family again they were just as shy as I was and the girls who had greeted me before with lively talk remained silent but after their first awkward words of gratitude,

we were again on the same terms When Ram Saran heard about th s inc dent he was very happy and gave me a piece of his *roti* without my en asking him and that night he read a longer chapter than usual from *Ramayana*

FIVE

The Juti

It was fifteenth of June and the cold winds of Rawalpindi had been replaced by the valley heat wave It was hot and sultry outside, and the temperature was 106 degrees although it was not yet eleven The blazing sun heated the flat roof until we felt like pottery figures in a kiln yet there was something singularly cold in the house

Ashok, my younger brother had been seriously ill for two days, and the lively activity which marks the home of a child was now suspended and a depressing emptiness haunted the large house Symptoms of his sickness were few and made no sense All that could be determined was that his temperature was above 102 degrees and did not change at all

I had gone out to feed the chickens, and when I was through, hot and perspiring I went straight to the drawing room All my sisters sat on the couch Gian Chand tells me Ashok has been taken to the hospital What s the matter? Do they know what he has?

After a painful silence sister Pom answered in a firm and controlled voice, He has meningitis

I was stunned and suddenly felt chilly All at once the house seemed cold and desolate Only the ceaseless ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece disturbed the stillness

I sat down behind the couch I was not yet four when meningitis blinded me Ashok was only a year old What if he should die? I must do something I thought, but the apathy was contagious Lunch time arrived and no one ate anything With the sound of every car on the street outside the tension heightened, and my heart would throb violently That might be Father I would think bringing us news and I was sure that in every mind this hope was foremost.

we moved forward to the back of the house and sister Pom cried, It s Blackie!

Panditji who was head clerk of my father s office was standing beside her What s the matter, Panditji? sister Pom asked

I don t know, Bahanji I was working in the office when I heard her

I could hear Blackie s short rapid gasps and a sound like scuffling gravel as she writhed between spasms Nimi bent to stroke her, but the yelps only grew louder

Leave her alone, Bahanji – she may bite Panditji continued Do you know when she was born?

The same day as Ashok I murmured

I thought as much he said Then he went into a long narration, but I was to depressed to listen

I would catch fragments of his words though, as he said, Their two souls were born on the same day and since they are both sick on the same day only one of them must die He sketched the details which led him to this conclusion and I was reminded of the *pandit* who had sat on the porch reading my palm pretending to keep me from following his intricate reasoning, yet muttering loud enough to evoke my admiration

No one had the strength or courage to contradict Panditji, and he, taking our resigned attitude as respect and admiration was encouraged to go on further until he had calculated the exact hours within which the dog must die if my brother were to be saved He fixed the time only an hour away Stupefied at his reasoning and by our misery we all stood there and before we knew it we were anxiously waiting and I was even praying for the death of the dog who only two days ago had been my constant companion running behind the bicycle, fetching a ball, and speaking for food She was a member of the family, not like the chickens fish or buffaloes Now I was feverishly longing for her death Forever, I thought, we were to depend on *pandits* advice and follow their instructions Whatever sinister opinions I had formed about *pandits* and *hakims* now vanished, and belief in Panditji s confident assertions seemed to be the only escape from that gloom ridden house.

He was saying She s got to die a natural death You can t kill her as if that had occurred to us We were too confused too weak to depend on our thinking or even our ability to stand there longer Yet d terminedly we stayed with Panditji to watch the painful struggle With each cry which was louder and more vig rous or with each deep gasping pant I would become thoughtful Maybe she will live and Ashok Blackie lingered on and though I winced at each penetrating whine I could have no pity fo her

When Panditji had repeat d his argument several times and could think of nothing more to say even he stopped Embar ra sed probably that his stock of ideas was so soon depleted he shouted for Qa im Ali who immediately bustled from the office at his command

Bring an old shoe he said and a long nail Qasim Ali obeyed at once and rather than spend time hunting up an old sho he offe ed o e of his own *jut s* Th n Panditji pounded a nail into th centre of the slipper like shoe N xt Panditji and Qa im Ali sat down on the ground each placing a fing r lightly un ler the head of the n il and balanced the *juti* loosely between them

What f llowed left a d ep imprint on my mind for it was in red bly ridiculou Panditji a meek and pious man de tined by h s b th to belong to the religi us stratum of Hindu society heaped such curses on the *jut* accused it of su h immorality and shouted with su h venom and all thi in front of my sisters that we were aghast Indeed such was the strength of that masculine throat that the howls of poor Blackie became inaudible

You *jut* he sho ited and began to curse it foully By your mother s name you must t ll the truth! Tell us the truth! Tell us the truth! Wl ose s ul will be taken? Whose soul – do you fea ? H e un iated each syllabl until even the *jut* could n t poss bly have mi sed them Then he turned around to us I am g i g t call names he said a d at the name of the soul whi h is going to be taken today this *j t* w ll spi

Blackie s yelps seemed more anguished than ever and she

whimpered as though exhausted Her sides heaved with each breath of the heavy air, yet no one even thought of giving her water

Panditji intoned monotonously, Is it Mohan Lal, Krishan Lal Gani Chand, Tara Singh until at last he called Is it Ashok Kumar? A deadening silence followed Had the *juti* spun? I wondered Sick and dizzy with emotion I was afraid to ask Panditji resumed, Is it Taraknath is it Blackie?

Then I heard the shoe hit the ground and Panditji got up You have nothing to worry about And without further ado he went back into the office I took my handkerchief from my pocket and swabbed at the perspiration which ran down my forehead We stood in apathy five minutes longer Then Blackie gave one far reaching cry and a last violent spasm

With her life extinguished, there was not much left for us to do Slowly we walked away as if from an uncovered grave, leaving Qasim Ali to dispose of Blackie s body If anyone cried, it was silently, for I did not hear them

We went into the drawing room and began our wait for Father s return Half an hour later around four o clock he arrived As he came into the drawing room no one asked a question He said only Everything is all right The lumbar puncture went off without a mishap

The news we had been waiting for ever since eleven o clock had arrived but the utter desolation of the house was unchanged

Are you all exhausted? my father asked

Daddyji, I broke in, why should this have happened to both of us?

I can t explain, he said humbly

In the silence that followed we heard the ticking clock on the mantelpiece

SIX

From Mela to the Murree Hills

In India where hunger and poverty are the reigning monarchs and where all are at the mercy of any army of mosquitoes and flies the sanitary conditions are at subhuman standards The Health Department has a monumental job to perform It not only must try to prevent outbreaks of epidemics by striking at the sources of poverty which cause them but once they are in the open it must confine their spread For this purpose the British Government gave the Health Department top priority and a large number of personnel

As an Assistant Director of Public Health in the divisions of Rawalpindi and Multan my father toured the districts in the two divisions and whenever an epidemic like cholera or plague overtook any vast area he would immediately go there sometimes on a half hour s notice He might be gone for as long as a week or a fortnight at a time Since I was not attending school I was permitted to accompany him now and then provided his tour did not take him into an epidemic area

One of these tours took me to a *mela* a fair of provincial importance which was held only seventy miles away from Pindi and where my father was expected to go and make sure that good sanitary standards were observed Sister Nimi and Cousin Yog who was visiting us in Pindi went too and the peon we took with us was Qasim Ali a pretentious imposing man conservative in outlook and very conscious of his dignified position as the attendant of an Assistant Director of Public Health

As we pulled away from Pindi bound for the *mela* Cousin Yog and my father s secretary sat in the front seat while sister Nimi and I took the back with Qasim Ali He immediately started telling us about the *mela*

It is too crowded, miss, he said, and you have to be careful For ten years he had accompanied officers to the *mela* and he said he had seen many, many terrible things happen Farmers had no respect for his uniform and refused to make way for him He had seen children, just our age, separated from their parents, never to be found again In his paternal condescending way, he asked us to stay near him always Sister Nimi, wishing to avoid argument with him, kept on nodding and agreeing He warned us not to buy anything from the street hawkers, for it wasn t safe, and he did not want to be held responsible by my mother

Incessantly, he talked, now demanding respect for his judge ment, now planting fear, until sister Nimi switched places with Yog, who immediately started telling Qasim Ali about his ex periences at the Karuk Chheter *mela* and whether Qasim Ali smiled or not, Yog laughed at each, only to relate one more daring Even sister Nimi leaned back from her seat in front to hear Yog and thus encouraged him

A *mela*, said Yog is one place where you can let yourself go, do what you want when you want It was the freedom he loved, and once, he said to frighten his sister Lil he had persuaded a snake charmer to let him have a venomless cobra to wrap around his neck Amid Qasim Ali s horror and sister Nimi s and my amusement, we finally reached the *mela*, and our car was im mediately directed by a policeman to our pavilion

After unloading there we left our separate tent to join the press of the crowd As we approached the main thoroughfare and as the crowd grew thicker, pushing from all directions, our progress grew slower and slower The hot sun beat down as if to establish its ascendancy and the smell which rose from the sweating bodies was equalled only by the aroma of steaming food

Qasim Ali, dressed in the woollen gold braid uniform and big red turban of an official, refused to mingle with the crowd Playing on sister Nimi s good sense, he tried restrain us, only to be out talked by Yog, and drowned by the crowd Doggedly, Qasim Ali followed us as long

dignified movement could compete with Yogi's agile lead.

Then Yogi suggested that we eat. Sister Nimi, looking over her shoulder for Qasim Ali and seeing that we had lost him, agreed. Now only the shrill notes of the bagpipe could be heard above the roar of the crowd, and once in a while, the voice of an over-energetic street hawker would beckon one and all to his *rehri*, a wheelbarrow, his shout replacing the cautions of Qasim Ali. We finally made our way to one of these *rehris* and each of us, folding banana leaves to make a cup, was served hot *alu chhole puri* and *halwa* (potato and chick peas in a pungent sauce, small wheat pancakes, and a sweetmeat made of flour, butter and sugar).

As we stood there licking our fingers, an incident occurred which to this day reminds me of the utter degradation imposed by poverty. The usual particulars I gathered later when the incident was related to my father. Among the crowd stood a mother with five children: one a boy about eight and four girls varying in age from five to ten. The healthy boy was heartily devouring his *alu-chhole* and asking for more. As his four sisters, whose thin knobby legs were too weak to resist the push of the throngs, stood with their hands joined, their mouths half-open and their hungry eyes turned to their brother, they made a piteous sight. Yet not one of them asked their brother or their mother for a morsel of food. Sister Nimi, noticing them, asked the little girls what was the matter. They looked at her uncomprehendingly. Then Sister Nimi, turning to the little boy, said, "Why don't you share with your sisters?" Bewildered, he turned to his mother, who appeared scarcely stronger than her daughters. Raising her tired eyes to Nimi's, she said in a weary voice, "Some have to starve." And pointing to the frail little girls added, "They will have to go first."

Sister Nimi was stunned, but before she could do anything, the press of the crowd behind us swept us away from the family.

We continued to mingle with the crowd, making our way from shop to shop, from stand to stand, where we purchased token gifts for the family, and as darkness came on, tired and exhausted, we started picking our way back to the pavilion.

Beyond our pavilion, we saw the thick cluster of tall loquat trees and wishing to avoid Qasim Ali sister Nimi suggested that we go over to them The trees were loaded with ripe loquats, and Yog ignoring the sign NO TRESPASSING RS 150 FINE asked us to wait while he ran to the neighbouring inspector s cottage to borrow a flashlight and a basket. Before Nimi could protest he was gone Soon he returned Then while he climbed the tree, he asked sister Nimi to stand lookout with the torch, and signal him if she found anyone approaching He asked me to hold up the basket while he filled it with loquats With his rapid movements from tree to tree, quickly the basket was full to the brim and he led us to a patch of grass hidden by the trees Abandoning all caution we began eating the loquats Yog was his cheery self, and the time passed all too quickly

An hour or so later, his unrestrained laughter betrayed us to the *chonkidar*, who, pointing to the pile of seeds told us it would do no good to deny our guilt, and choked off Yog s hastily con trived defence. But just then Qasim Ali arrived and drawing himself erect demanded of the watchman Don t you know they re children of the Assistant Director of Public Health?

But if the *chonkidar* s arrival was disconcerting Qasim Ali s was no more pleasing All the way back to the pavilion, he scold ed us I ve been looking for you for hours he said What if something had happened to Miss Nimi? Who would have been blamed for it? I who else? What if something had happened to him? he said, pointing to me What would Dr Sahib say? Would I have my job left? Would I have anything left? Don t you have any thought for your servants? And on and on he went, now sulking now scolding

What have you been doing? he said Where did you eat? Sister Nimi muttered without thinking At one of the *halwans*

Didn t I tell you that food was no good? What if you get sick by tomorrow? And where did you wash those loquats, Yog Sahib? Yog tried to crack a joke by saying, Why, Qasim Ali, it rained only yesterday But Qasim Ali was not amused As we reached the pavilion however, he simmered down, for Father had returned Yog later told us that when he went back the

following day to pick up his torch he saw Qasim Ali heartily feasti g on loquats and that hi pile of seeds far surpassed ours

The next day all f us went with Father on his inspection It was still early in th m rning and as we neared the streets lead ing to the main tho oughfare they were deserted The restful silen e bore witn s to the frenzied activity of the night before and only whe we had almost rea hed the tents which housed the temporarily liberated peasants their wi es an l children was the lull nterrupted by the hildren hustli g to fetch water wash ing and g tting p epar d for the la t day of the *m la*

My father s staff of inspecto s who stood by the tents greeted my f ther and h inquired about unusual cases which might forew n him of an epid mic As each in pector eplied in the negat e we f lt a k n en e of j y All mo ning was pa sed i vi it g tent aft r tent and then in pecting th mid ay

Th *halw* had already eached their sta ds a d were fan ning their fi es while app ent s scar ly in th ir teens washed the pan hoist d the canopie and with cheap colou ed papers and balloons decorated the hops Some *h lu* l ad already start d prepa ing th batter and I could h a the huge spoons slapp ng rhythmi ally in pot up a d down the m d ay and the inspectors walki g to a d f o asking to see the cloths which we to protect th *thali* and demand ng to inspect milk and egetables

Watching the e *halwa s* I wa rem nded of the family we had een the day b fore the i cident which h d been forgotten du ing our shopping and excursion fo loquats The same tho ght mu t have occu red to si ter Nimi also for she began to relate the incide t to my father She told him how shocked she l ad be n, and how we had lost the family in the push of the crow l bef re food could be bought for them

My father told us that during his inspecti ns he l ad en cou tered case after case wh e the gi ls were allowed to starve *befo e a boy went hu gry Try he said to ee it from their* poi t of v ew A girl onstitutes a heavy espo s bil ty for a poor pea nt He is char ed with a husband and often the success h depends on the size f

dowry the poor man can offer He is forced, therefore, to borrow money from usurers at exorbitant rates of interest, to insure his daughter s happiness Sometimes, he went on, the debt persists years after the marriage, yet according to the prevailing custom, the parents of the bride must never eat, or even take a drink of water in the village where a daughter is married

A son on the other hand, can be relied upon to help on the farm from the time he is ten, and is also a security against sickness and old age He takes care of his aged parents and assumes responsibility for the whole family on his father s death

My mind went back to the time when my parents in hushed voices first considered the chances of finding suitable matches for my sisters We were comparatively rich people, and yet the responsibility of finding a husband, providing a dowry, and seeing that the girl was happily settled was evidently a problem for us, too

Now the people were starting to fill the middle of the street, and the street hawkers had resumed their shouting their voices somewhat hoarser than the day before That afternoon we ate our lunch at the *halwais* and even Father joined us We shopped some more, and tired but happy, we started for home

As we eased our way through the crowds my sister described to me the torn and shabby dresses, freshly dyed which clothed the people

Only the day before, Yog had made us laugh and chat and events with Qasim Ali, though tedious at times, had continued to amuse us But now, even though the bagpipes still played and the men and women responded to the gay music, simultaneously we all became thoughtful, and wondered about the the life each villager had left behind to attend this yearly festival

Even Yog s lightheartedness was dampened As we left the *mela* that night, my father did most of the talking answering our inquiries about the people who did not live as we

During the summer months when the direct rays of the hot sun would press down on the level plains we would follow the cold, reviving wind of the winter to its mountain home

stations I believe are a phenomenon peculiar to India and more p ominently so si ce the B ti h *raj* Unable to bear the heat of the plain whe only a hundred or so miles away the towering and majestic Himalayas be k ned cool and gr en Englishmen *established mall h ll stati ns on suitable spu s in the lower and* middle range tret h g along the fifteen hundred mile ra ge from east to w st For m n with mea s these hill statio s be c me e ort vhe e they uld take thei w o k in their briefcases a d st ll enjoy all the l fe and s e e y and freshness of the mountai s Ind ed du ing the B iti h *j* there we e two capitals fo India one n Delhi du ing the w nter and one in Simla fo the umme

Fo th British civ l ser ants in Rawalpind Mu ree Hills w as the Simla and during the umme all the highe ech lons w uld seek fuge n thi small a d ompact town whi h lay only fo ty miles away from Pind We would sta t for Murree Hills every Ju e all nine of u and a ervant pa ked into a car with our *bed olls* ho st d a d st app d on the oof ou suitcases bulg ng from the half-open tru k and the small Briti h flag flying n fr nt

Wh le my fath r oft had to pe d m ch of his time om m t g fr m Mu ee H ll t P ndi and touring the v llages n h s d tri t we w uld all tay p in the h ll in a small secluded ottage bu d n a st p canyo In thi summer vacation we lo t all c n c sne s of time and the a ly mornings wo ld be spe t tak g lo g walks o er twisted miles of windi g tra l or riding hor s for hou s

One g ey m sty m ing befo e the sun wa h gh enough to r ach o r the mounta n t ps we l ft ou cottage f a walk Si t r N m a d I we e sepa ted fr m the e t f the fam ly a d as we w nde ed on steeply slopi g roa l which na ro d to a rugged trail when we pa sed the la t house I s nsed fo the fi st time why the e stately mounta ns po sess the thoughts f m u tain ers the world over why ad entu ou o ls hungry for the beauty and sol tud f the l nely peaks t y to conquer the un o qu rabl e e though th y p sh in the r att mpts *As we tried to make ur way up the rocky cliff g pping the*

strong, sharp edges of the jagged rocks, and while sister Nimi nervously tried to make me feel the sweep of mountains and distant valley, I was seized with an insatiable urge to see these mountains for myself, to climb them by myself, and to aspire to the highest summits with the men who scale them

I wanted sister Nimi to stop her description It gave me the same feeling of being left alone that I was to experience at the hill station of Gulmarg, Simla and Mussoorie Stop it, Nimi! I said Please stop it She broke off in the middle of her sentence, and I could tell she was hurt No sooner had I said this than I felt ashamed at giving way to such rudeness She was taking such pains and trying so hard to make me feel with her As I thought of this and of my ingratitude my frustration grew and intensified, until I would have given anything to have retracted my words Sister Nimi immediately regained her poise and changed the subject to how we would find our way back to the cottage

Day after day was spent in the luxuriant surroundings of these cliffs and canyons In the evening however, we found diversion along the main street of Murree Hills the Mall Road was about two miles long with a quarter mile stretch in the centre lined on both sides by small shops with Western style show windows The salesmen were well groomed prototypes of their fellow tradesmen in England with jovial extravert mannerisms and hearty handshakes All the summer inhabitants of Murree Hills flocked to the Mall Road after six o clock strolling up and down until they had sized up the bargains in the show windows, and greeted and chatted with their friends from the valley Wearied by their walk students might stop in at the coffee house, where all the current political ideas clashed over *café au lait* and roasted nuts, until the growing heat of arguments rivalled the noise of the Mall

A slender street sloped from the Mall Road like an outflung arm and along this street was the Indian bazaar with large baskets spread out from one end to the other half hiding vege table vendors and the dilapidated shops of cobblers and black smiths Economically minded housewives and domestic

stood arguing with these vendors trving to whittle down the price of a tu nip or t mato a *p ce* or t\ o

As I heard the vendors barg ining day in and dav out I n ver cea ed to wonder at the incredible stamina of their vocal chords Their whol ucce was based on ne trade secret how well they coul l out argue their cust mers This bazaar was the Mall Road of the poo whe th well to-d only sent their servants so that th y m ght hav fre h egetables fo th ir kitchens

On the upp r Mall Road a egment of thi bazaar could be felt for at each e d of tl e Mall tood coolies trying to enlist cu t mers to rent h r e or to tak rickshaws When I first arrived i Murree H ll I had e the h ard of n r s en ricksha One of th first days wh s ster Pom and I wer strolling the Mall I heard the h rp rhythm c slap f ba e feet on the ough h lly r id and a clipped v ice aying Faster – I mu t keep an ap-po ntm nt

Wh t is it? I a ked

A ricksh w she s id Then he e pla ned that two men were s ui g r ading the p pe s while f u ool s pull d the rick shaw up th ste p st t

After that d y wh e we walk d I would strain my ears to h ar that sound until I gr w s p ofi nt that I c uld e n di tingui h th a king ga ps of the two men in front who bo e the brunt of the i kshaw s we ght like buggy ho ses from the co r e he vy breathi g of th t o m n wh p hed from behind S met me during ou walk we would sta l by the ra li g at som high point and li ten to arguments betwe n sub-mi s v coolies begg ng f r an *n a* apiece mo e and com mand i g u t me s wh wo ld walk calmly nto their homes shutting the hea y doo s behind them

My father told us that the c ool es li ed in the m untain all the year r und and u i l th litte e t cold snows a d st rms in their shabby cl thes and w th cant supplies Often he said they succumb to the r gg d cl m te and stre uous life e en bef re they r a h fo ty and th y c n sur ive at mo t only ten to fifte n years of steady icksh w work

In the even ngs we would return f ome tired and exhaust d

from excursions on the mountains and walks on the Mall Road We might linger by the fireplace, pressing close together warm ing our hands and rubbing noses and ears to rid them of numb ness If the fire was burning low, we roasted chestnuts, and u ed them to drive the chilblains from our fingers

Then one by one we would retire to bed and if the cold, icy wind were not blowing too strongly we would leave a crack of our window open through which, faintly we could hear the low sad melodies played in the limited range of the flute so typical of the mountaineers music Occasionally the powerful roar of the wind would obscure the low notes of the melody and we would tax every sense to capture them now barely succeed ing now failing altogether Sometimes in the far distance, the fading sound of the flute would be replaced by some hillman s melancholy chant, swelling and sinking with the whims of the gusty wind

With the passage of time spectacular as well as simple hap-penings become mere items in the catalogue of memory yet there is a power and strength in simple experiences which makes their impressions persist long after you have left the mountains and returned to the complex routine of the plains I have spent almost every summer in the mountains and after the break up of India even the icy winters when the ground was covered knee deep with snow Each time I have returned I have felt that same passionate longing revive to hear again the melli fluous notes of the solitary tunes of the mountain dwellers, or walk undisturbed with only thoughts as companions

The Dinner Table School

BEGINNING with our stay in Pindi several new institutions came into ou li es and none more enduring than our dinner table school My thr e older sisters had entered college early at the age of fourte n and came home exhilarated by the n w ideas of Western cultur they encountered Curious about Christianity and Weste n ph lo ophy th y plied Father who had travelled extens vely in both Europe and America with que tions and for the sak of c nvenienc it was dec ded to h ld all discussions at dinner tim

We ate our dinner at half past eight and where before, in Lahore we had rushed off to Bhabiji our grandmother to h ar her tori s now we linger d at the dinner table while the ser vant clea ed away

At first th se dinner table discu si n re olved around my si ters who told of th ir college work under the superv sion of the gentle M ther Super or and th Si t rs They would ask Father to tell them bout Chri t anity and democratic ways in England and s met me their que tions assumed the simplicity of asking only for instance if all Westerners were as qu t and gentl as the Sisters It wa soon clear that my sisters were subconsciou ly eeing the West a it was personified by the nun and their read ng was making th m bel e e that England com p sed the wh le Western Hem sphere They sa d if you under stood the struggle between th down t odden workers and the indu trial sts n e ght enth and n neteenth-century England you could understand the identi al onflict which spread to all the Western countries and to them a look a the Br ti h Empire explained th whole imperi l government f the Romans

T correct such ers mpl ficat on Fathe told us of h s experi ences in Eu ope and Am rica He told us about the great democracy in America the tyranny of Ru sia the fascism of

central Europe and gradually we gained a whole new per spective of Christian society We saw variety and diversity for the first time behind the white skin

As my father described life in the Western world we were all moved with the desire to see it for ourselves Gradually the conversations at night turned into an imaginary tour of the European countries and America with all of us packed into a big lorry We would see the night clubs of France and hear the music festivals of Scandinavian countries and American jazz bands all at one time Then we would imagine ourselves to be tasting Italian spaghetti French wines and American hot dogs

I do not recall when this casual narration of anecdotes and imaginary voyages became the actual planning of a tour of the hemisphere Since we were so large a family we decided we could not afford to go on a ship or a plane We must have a lorry built in Pindi and drive to England To be sure all roads did not lead to London yet for a nominal fee our lorry could be ferried over any water we would have to cross The next problem was where we would find such a lorry We paid a visit to the Chevrolet dealer in Pindi who promised to install an engine in the body which we would have built Many nights were spent drawing designs for this vehicle how the beds would fold in where exactly we would place the water tank, and cook our food Every attempt must be made to save space Father said yet every provision must be made to meet emer gencies in mountains and deserts

At last it was decided to call in the carpenters for consultation They advised that the lorry would have to be two stories high, the body alone would cost about fifteen thousand *rupees* then a little over four thousand dollars These carpenters built a wooden model of the lorry, which we placed on view on the mantelpiece There the matter rested and our next question was what we were going to do once we got there

My sisters Father said could dress in costumes from the peasant s simple *dhoti* and glass bangles to the luscious *sari* of Benares and gold necklaces We would hire a stage and develop an act depicting a scene of typical Indian village life.

He told u how naive Westerners were about the Indian way of l fe or indeed about all Asian peoples White men had curiosity he sai l but th y were v anting in sources of informa tion To suppl ment my sist rs performances tl erefore he would lecture about Indian philo ophy and history and – if he could find an aud en e – tropical medi ine We were to tak picture exempl fying var u fa ets of Indian life from north to south and east to west from simple illages to modern cities

Even though Brit sh peopl had ruled India for t vo hundred years my father sa d they had not b en able to reach i s soul or feel i heartbeat Wh le it was true that many factors entered into th s la k of und rstanding on the part of the British the main reason vas that even the simplest and poorest Indian pea ant was a proud and eserved person an l his traditional ways wl ich the British th ughtlessly d s arded as mere super stit on comp ised h s whole be ng and gav him virtue and strength In h p rson were reflected cent ries of faith and suffering and n part he summed up Indian history

One f th days my father went on in his enthusiasm th p se t struggl for ind p nd nce will culminate in free d m for India and ind d f r all ubject nation If all the nations a ound th globe a e to l e in a ha monious wo ld a better under tanding among their peopl s is imp rative Our job th n was to interpret for the W s erner the life of an average Indian and to capture his pirit But to do thi we ourselves had t unde tand l im His mind was simple and stra ghtforward not confused by more than a f w conside ations It wo ked on a white-or black this-or that basis It was this mind that we should try to clarify for West rner He pointed to the servants and said when an Englishman ente ed the house they would treat nto their shell beca se th y associated auth rity with white skin and a brusque voi e They felt inferior to the Engl shman and even aft r his long rule they had not begun to ass milate this foreign element While the e servants would argue freely with my mother and even with my uncl s, they shied from sp aking before my father He att buted this to his holding a post previously held by Englishmen Peasants

in other districts, he said, were the same way, and whenever he went on tours, he had to make special efforts always to speak Panjabi, and thus win their confidence

My mother hinted that this dream of travel was all very well if he had the money But my father replied that industrious people with imaginative ideas were sure to be successful We would surely be able to make enough money to finance the trip Every day I looked forward to dinner and to hearing that easy, confident, reassuring voice, interrupted by occasional questions What had started out as a narration of interesting experiences and then transformed itself into daydreaming now had assumed the character of serious study My father bought some pamphlets and books on Europe and India and after our meal he would real aloud in English stopping only to explain various points in Hindi and colour them with his experiences

I would understand very little of what he read and hours would pass by without my comprehending any more than the verbs I had learned at Dadar School Sometimes in passing he mentioned such names as da Vinci Copernicus or Voltaire and I often wondered what lay behind these names Hearing them spoken at our house served to accentuate my curiosity and arouse my insatiable desire to go to America and to get on with my schooling Sometimes I couldn t restrain myself, however, and would interrupt to ask him questions or to explain or translate, which he invariably did For me these readings were like scriptures reinforcing my belief that we would all one day pack into the lorry and leave India – my family to tour Europe and I to attend Perkins

Even though no definite date had been set for going abroad, my father had accumulated a leave of a year and a half to be used for just this purpose and I never doubted for a moment the eventual reality of our trip

Meanwhile my academic progress was still at a standstill while the other children were going happily to school As I was to learn years later immediately following my blindness my father had written in his diary I will sell my soul to give him the

highe t education possible But his willingness to make sacri fices and his unwaver ng determination to treat me as a normal child and end w me with the same opportunities as his other children se me l no v to be frustrated

He had observed that in India the most self ufficient blind people were musician Ind d ne of them Master Kohli had tutored my si t rs in Lahore v hil I was in Bombay So now in Rawalpindi my father h red a tutor for me

Th s teach r Pandit Hukam Chand call d Panditji belong ed like many Indian mus cians t th old school of Indian mu c at l had gained his tra ning not by attending a conser vat ry but by l ving vith his tea he and att nding to all his demands In a ordanc w th t aditi n he be ame a dis iple of his ma ter extra ting concealed knowl dg by mas aging his feet *cooking* h s food wa hing his clothes and submitting to his w ll

Th e *guru* mparted to his disciple his understanding of par t ular *raga* cal patt rns for tunes and mu ic which he the *gu u* had received from h s *guru* who in turn had recei ed it from hi It was like th p s r ption f th *hak ms* ne er wr tten but entru ted to th safety of mem ry lone and pass d by wo d of mou h to th mo t de o ed pupil through a long impress ve line of generations

Panditji regretting the hanging o iety which was under mining his prero ati es was forced to impart for a fee these secret whi h w re h s legacy acqu red under unbearable condi tions and th ugh ha dship whi h only he could relate How ever much he might value th m ney he could not quite re con ile himself to sharing th secrets of Indian music

It was n t surpr i g then that Panditji in his b tterness, had also become an un crupulous man He cam to teach m not be ause he espected o had an aff nity for me as a *gu u* might f r his d ciple but as a cho e forced upon him which had to be perf rmed how ever dete table

Pand tj came three times a week in the afternoon to give h s lessons The primary thing in mus c h would say is to get your vo ce trained so that it can go from octave to octave with

out difficulty Thus the whole hour would be spent in exercising the vocal chords, and when he departed I would be left hoarse and breathless

While I sang he sat playing the *tablas* small drumlike instruments With each thump on the tightly stretched hides my heart throbbed Panditji had a very short temper and I knew that if I were to miss a beat he would go into a tirade wishing it were the old days so he could take a stick to me just as his *guru* had to him

Since Indian music has no harmony and centuries of change have left it untouched, understanding of rhythm and voice training are the major requisites for proficiency And as Indian music is built on various scales each scale definitely designated because of the mood it creates to the appropriate hour of day or night, the rest of our time was spent studying exactly which scales created what moods In strict, classical Indian music once a particular scale has been chosen say *bhairon* for instance which creates a melancholy mood because of its minor quality and is thus appropriate to the early quiet hours of the dawn no deviation from the accepted scale can be permitted So the technique is to evolve various tunes constructed on particular *ragas*

Thus our time was spent in learning rhythm training the voice and gaining appreciation of the various *ragas* Panditji was very careful to drill me in a *raga* day after day, so that I would avoid the pitfall of introducing a foreign note and thus corrupting the purity of the music

He pointed out to me that the film industries who were more interested in producing popular melodies were determined to undermine the classical music and it would be left to the younger generation to see that the classical form remained pure

He imparted his knowledge more as favours than lessons If I joined him in disparaging the pseudomusic of the film industry, he would feel well disposed towards me Then he would condescend to teach me new variations on *ragas* which no one had as yet committed the sin of writing down on paper

Panditji was not a conscientious man by any means and unaware that even while I was singing my ears still kept track of

h s mo ements he would get up go to the mantelpiece and set the clock ten minutes ahead so that he might shorten the t me of his ordeal Yet no one could summon enough courage to ever challenge, without proof the integrity of the sage For Pand tji was a very learned man and whatever faults he had they vere dictated by n cessity

But one day as hance would have it just as he was tamper ing with the clock my father walked in Father was at first embarrassed at ha ing caught Panditji r d handed Then un able to ontrol h s irritat n he a ked Panditji what is it that makes you uninterested n this pupil and moves you to set the cl ck ahead e n though you adm t he s a promising stu d nt? W e you pre ar cating when you comment d on my son talent?

Pand tj r t rt d I was not that time But Doctorji why would Almighty Providence hav g n l to mankind if not t use? What haos ther would be if all m n followed only the stra ght path of truth! Do y u not adm t t i so?

But Pand tji God mad nak s and poison as well Would y u by that rea ning drink p n?

Ah Doctorji you fo get that I do take pois n wh n I am s ck But however that may be p n is not an innate quality l ke a lie w thout whi h we uld not ee the truth Even you Doctorji tell lie to patient vergi g on death Y u tell him he may g t well in tead of the truth about the black and dismal fo tune awaiting him White lies or black l s they are l es neverthele s And h id there would be no t uth if there were no l e ju t as th r w uld n t be good with ut v l S Doc t rj I tell l es just a often as truth t gi e truth more alu

Exasperated with th s devious philosophical discourse my father said only Pand tji I hope und r th s r f the climate may be more c nduc t truth than to l es Then he left the room a suring Panditj who was anything but insulted that he had won his case and that the long yea s of training under his *gu u* h d not been wasted

But there was one thing Pand tji did not teach and I never dared ask him to teach it to me

Only once a year could he be prevailed upon for his unique rendition of *ghunghrus*, the most treasured art which he had acquired from his *guru*

In India, the dancers tie a tight band of small bells around their ankles, and as they dance, these bells ring out in rhythmical tunes, disclosing the precise movements of their feet Panditji had learned from his *guru* to imitate the sound of these bells in his throat, and he did this with such precision and authenticity that one might have suspected him of hiding these *ghunghrus* somewhere in his chest Once a year around Diwali, a great Hindu festival which celebrates the return of Ram from exile by gradually preparing Panditji for three weeks by catering to his every wish in food, sweetmeats or services, he could be persuaded to give a rendition

One of his conditions was that we would not invite any friends and when Pushpa a friend of sister Pom and a great musician herself, wanted to come and hear him, we had to hide her behind the curtains during the performance

A day before the Diwali Panditji would stroll into the drawing room and instead of finding me there alone, he would discover the whole family

No lesson today, Vedji? he would ask me I would look somewhat puzzled, and then he would say Well it s holiday time – I ll come back after Diwali, and start to leave Then Mother would ask Panditji won t you stay for a glass of *lussi*?

No – no – no, he would say, and my mother in the typical manner of an Indian hostess would refuse to take no for an answer, and would persist While my mother and Panditji were still debating, I would run into the pantry and fetch a glass of *lussi* Now you have to stay, I would say and he would finally answer, If you insist

Even though he took his seat on the floor by the harmonium, still there was no guarantee that the performance would be on No one dared suggest it, for if once he said no you could depend on his obstinacy never to relent It was not like drinking a glass of buttermilk, which by custom Panditji could never accept at

the fi st offering His performance had to come from within f om an inner inspiration no external forces would be permitted t i terfere with it.

After he had taken h s place on the floor he would run his limber fi gers lightly o er the harmonium First one could hear the soft tones forming but as he would start pumping the bellows f th h rmo ium w th more care the tones ould become c mpl x scales For half an hour or so he would ju t play scal s Then with the g eat ease of a *gu u* he would shade into play ng t es all the time tryi g to create a mood conducive to his nd tion We would all wait appr hensi ely uncertain whethe our week of cat ri g would be re arded

S met mes h uld stop playing the harmo um and lift his hands completely ff the keyboa d That s it I would thi k and a mom nt of u pe would follov b oken only when he rubbed h s hands together but the he w uld resume playing

Now the early g whe he only kimmed the notes would be transf med to mel di us scales with the flat notes empha s zed and p lo ged until th tu e took on the dignity w rthy of h end t n O pectat ons v ld ha pen The I would hear a sound l ke blowing a no s l ss whistle and if I had not kn wn what was to foll w I might have thought he was out of breath The th blo g ound would ass me a m re regular characte F lly he wo ld b eak into the bell like notes Slow ly but urely the s und would g ow more and mo e like the low ji gling of th al bells Then th tune on the harmo ium and the r nant himing would be co-o dinated unt l they blended int ne sen us melody

In my m nd I could imag e Uday Sha kar the great da cer dan i g there him lf What k ll what pe fect co-ordi ation of b eath ng wh t control over his lung I thought Sometimes f r two o thre m utes he could not breathe in any air and the *ghu ghru* himed from octa e to octa e w thout his interrupt ng the patte n for eve the shall west b eath Fo o e preci h ur with t stoppi g t take e lo g b eath he we t on ne play ng th am tun twice as if h h d a u l mit d repertoir His perfect rhythm and excellently tim d cadence

made the melody and the chimes rich and beautiful We sat spellbound and in ecstasy At that moment, but only at that moment I would gladly have become his disciple

When he stopped he was perspiring and gasping for air He did not need any applause and compliments to assure him of his effect He knew the full state of our rapture After sitting im mobile for fifteen minutes, until he had recaptured full control of his breath he would quietly depart without any more ado and for us, the celebration of Diwali with its hundreds of candles and *diyas* and appetizing aromas was off to a good start a day before its arrival

Whenever the family and I would despair over the nerve racking idiosyncrasies of this man we would always think of this occasion, and would be filled with admiration for his know ledge, which was not confined merely to a thorough understand ing of *ragas* but to a perfect control over his vocal chords If his conceit and his eccentricities, ranging from tampering with the clock to flying into tirades at the slightest excuse became sometimes unbearable we continued to put up with him We well knew that almost all good classical teachers in Pindi were no better than he, and though he taxed our endurance, and sometimes almost crushed the talent which I had for Indian music, nevertheless he was indispensable It was a poor substi tute for what I might have attained during those years, but it was at least a partial compensation Had it been my fortune to have him longer than I did I might have extracted more of that concealed knowledge which had ripened during its long contact with generations of sages, and perhaps even learned the art of imitating *ghunghrus* so that this treasure would not have per ished with his death I might even have become a musician entrenched in his school and versed in his techniques for even he admitted I was a promising student, but this could be achieved by no less means than by becoming the most devoted of all his disciples abandoning home and academic education to follow his solitary passion Instead my thoughts and aims were pledged elsewhere, in a different direction, and I cannot say I am sorry for it

Father had been unusually quiet Shanti, Father responded pensively, I don t like all that s been going on

What s been going on? brother Om asked

While we listened Father told us that a head-on clash between Hindus and Muslims seemed in the making I could not help thinking of Ram Saran and Qasim Ali one Hindu the other Muslim Both were my friends

In the history of India, Father went on the two most precious principles have been those of non violence and renunciation Leaders like Buddha Asoka and Gandhi, he said, have been the pathfinders in the long journey of our nation. These men have guided the course of history towards harmony and peace, but even as we sit in this dining room a storm is brewing which seems to be bent upon turning the work of the ages to ashes

While Gandhi s followers he said were locked in the British jail during the war so that Englishmen would not have to fight the war with their house divided more militant forces seem to have taken over the country I fear he pronounced solemnly for the safety of our nation and our home.

Much of this, I am sure, sister Umi said impulsively, is British rumour If they can convince everyone, Daddyji that as soon as they leave the storm that you speak about will break out and our nation will go to pot maybe they think we will change our tune and ask them to stay on in India

Maybe, Father said thoughtfully but they are wrong India will be free, but I fear what freedom will bring in its train

I can hardly wait, sister Nimi said to see the lights glowing on Independence Day It will be a real Diwali

Like the one we had on V J Day? Usha asked

Much better than that, sister Pom said

I think I will save the ten *rupees* I said that I won from Ram Saran at the victory of the Allies, to buy *diyas* for our house.

Daddyji, Usha asked do you really think that Ram Saran and Qasim Ali are going to fight?

There was a long pause.



exceeds the means of the parents, simply because a large dowry may fetch a better suitor

When I married your father, Mother began, I had nothing in common with him I could not speak English and had too little education even to talk with him intelligently I had no hand in our marriage, and neither did he It was all arranged by our parents I went as his bride without having even a fragmentary picture of this man with whom I was to spend the rest of my life, and whose happiness was to be mine And finding him so unlike myself I was very disheartened, and my confidence in my parents judgement was shaken

Had there been a way open to me to get out of that marriage I gladly would have, but thank God there wasn t Had I left him then I would never have had all the happiness I have known since

So heeding my mother s advice I continued to suffer in silence The only way, she would say to me is to win him by sacrifice And had I not been brought up to love and adore my husband we might have –

Could my father have been heartless, I thought? He was so gentle and understanding

Yet when you children were born he would rather play with you than go to the club of which he was so fond Urmil, when you arrived, I was not at all grieved, for he was by my side Thus the sacrifice bore fruit

Sister Nimi interrupted Mother But would you not have been just as happy – even happier – with someone else someone who was perhaps less educated and Westernized?

Well that s hard to say, for I m very happy now and in a sense I was happy even when I suffered most I had been brought up that way, and now that I look back on it the first years would have been much worse if I hadn t been prepared for them

I agree with Mother, said sister Pom It s a different kind of education that makes a good mother

Sister Umi broke in again I don t see what happiness is in suffering

children, sister Umi insisted, and still keep some of the old customs

You can t just discard a few customs in the kind of society we live in sister Pom said Perhaps we are subject to more suffering, but then we can endure more than we might other wise.

But at what cost, Pom? asked Nimi The deplorable pov erty – we have never gone hungry to know really what physical suffering is Our mother has never been beaten by her husband, either

I thought about our grandmother Bhabiji and how she had sometimes suffered at the temper of Lalaji yet she talked about Lalaji always in a very tender and respectful manner

But as I say Nimi you can t blame all this on how we marry, said Pom That is the way of life in this crowded country

I think our whole family system would degenerate Umi said Pom We are taught from childhood to respect Father and to acknowledge that his word is final in all things Perhaps there isn t as much freedom but there is more than enough unity in love and affection to compensate for it We don t have broken homes where the children belong neither here nor there

Sister Umi half laughing went on Pom you have to admit this is a man s world, and in this country especially I don t see why it should be I m just as good as any of them

I hope you realize the consequences in our society if the women started leading independent lives, working like men

But perhaps there wouldn t be so much poverty said Umi

Then Nimi spoke slowly I see with you Pom There is good in suffering But not when it s carried so far

Society will change said Umi as we get our freedom and there is less subservience and useless misery in Indian homes No theorizing is going to change matters People will change of their own accord I m looking forward to that day

Soon the conversation turned to the anticipated freedom of India and the subject of marriage was dropped I wished Father had been there to say something about how the free system actu ally worked in the Western world

engage qualified teachers who are so scarce everywhere Apart from the principal who was not blind the teaching staff at Emerson consisted of six members whose education at best had terminated with high school graduation a feat considered spectacular for the visually handicapped

My father upon visiting this institute, was very much struck by the financial needs of the school and was very disheartened by the inefficiency and substandards of education So he approached the Finance Minister Sir Manohar Lal whom he knew personally and requested him to increase the annual allotment to the school Sir Manohar Lal knew of the special interest of my father and made a single grant of Rs 45 000 (about £3 000)

While this allocation enabled the institute to add a new wing and admit students whose petitions had been pending for years, it did not improve the academic situation and although later on another grant made possible the engaging of Mr Khanna, an excellent administrator even his devoted efforts on behalf of better education for the blind were frustrated

I tried to prevail upon my father to send me to this school a request which at first he did not consider with much favour for although the school was located only three miles away from our home a maze of narrow streets and dirt roads made a prohibitive path from my home in Temple Road to Emerson School inside Sheranwala Gate If no mills were present to mar the sky with suffocating smoke as in Dadar one had only to walk within Sheranwala Gate to find its substitute in the stench of rotten vegetables and human filth Then too there was a question of how much I would gain from this trade school even if the hurdle of distance were overcome But my father seeing my unyielding determination to get away from the confines of the four walls at home decided to give the project a try

One of our servants, Gian Chand, was asked to cruise all the streets leading to Sheranwala Gate on his bicycle and map out a route which minimized the danger from accidents If this rou
were satisfactory then Gian Chand might carry me
bicycle to school He came home to tell my father that

when the student made a mistake, he would curse him violently

I soon realized that it was political indoctrination, not teaching that Mr Baqir considered his job. 'Boy,' he would say in his harsh and confident voice which challenged dispute, 'tell me, what is the Hindu religion? Do they have a prophet like Mohammed? Are they the chosen people? No, they are meek and servile, ridden with tradition and superstition. We Moslems conquered them with the greatest ease. Wasn't it the strength of our religion that converted so many heroes?'

I was too naïve, not initiated yet in the ways of Mr Baqir, and these perversions of the truth added to my confusion. I was terrified at being in a classroom with this teacher who could better educate us in the use of vile language, profane yet picturesque, than make us efficient in reading Braille. In the confusion of tapping canes, creaking fans and the roar of Mr Baqir, it was indeed difficult to listen for Mr Khanna's footsteps and warn Mr Baqir in time to control his language and confine his remarks to Braille, for in the event that we let Mr Khanna slip up on Mr Baqir, we were assured of the stinging blows of a wet cane across our knuckles, which often missed its mark to strike another part more tender.

For two hours, Mr Baqir bellowed at his students without ever showing signs of vocal fatigue. I was frightened and shocked at the crudity of this man. I thought of the refined nuns about whom my sister had talked so enthusiastically in Pindi and felt depressed. My desire for education wavered as never before. I felt the four walls drawing in closer and closer, and the low roof crushing my ambition, and I felt too dizzy to hold my head up. I longed for four o'clock when I might see Gian Chand.

The next two hours were spent in a better atmosphere, for they were devoted to my music lessons, which were held in the new wing of the building. Besides my singing, the continuous rhythm of the *tabla* and the shrieking notes of the harmonium checked forever any urge Mr Chander, my music teacher, might have felt to copy the mannerisms of Mr Baqir. They were two hours of calm, soothing to my tired body and discouraged spirits.

Yes, sir four years

You were at Dadar School weren t you? And how did you like that?

I was happy there, sir But the climate didn t suit me, and so I was sick a good part of the time

You were exposed, then, quite young to what schools for the blind are like, and still you wanted to come back?

Well, sir, my brother and all my sisters went to school, and I admire my father, who is so learned and has travelled so much He wanted me to have as good an education as his other children He even tried to send me to Perkins a few years ago

Why didn t they take you?

They said, sir, I was too young and should know more about my country before I went there

That s true enough What have you been learning these last few years my boy? If you want to go to America you must have much more preparation than this

But, sir there were no schools for me to go to here

You could have been tutored at home

I was in music

But why not arithmetic, or English?

No one knew how to teach blind children

It s not too different from teaching other children I admit, some understanding is necessary Your sisters could have taught you

This was the first time that such a question had been put to me and ever since then, it has been a recurring thought Even if each one of them had helped me an hour a day I would have learned just as much as though I were going to school

I don t know, sir Perhaps they have always been too busy'

Too busy to teach you? That s not my impression of your family

I can t think of any other reason

Maybe they treated you too normally, and never considered your special problems

My father always said that I would one day go to America and learn there

But they took this too much for granted Remember that you must know very much about y ur own country if you ever plan to come back he What would you do supposing you d d go to Ameri ? Would you be interested in coming back t India and helpi g th blind pe ple?

I don t thi k so If I could see I would be a doctor ju t like my father

But you an t see What el e but tea hing would there be for you to do?

I ouldt ach in a uni er ty Maybe take up law

Well I do t m d t lling you you ar too ambitious and so is your father I know you b th and can make allowances but I don t thi k th t autho ities in America w ll Maybe I can help you Say you ome in h e an h u a day – you spend two hours w th Baqi don t you? Well you can spend one of them w th me I could help y u ome w th history and we could talk this o e W uld y u l k th t b y?

Yes s Then ummoning my pr sence of mi d I d l ke it e y mu h sir

Well y u just do that Fo the fi t tim he fumbled for words Well we ll s Y u ca go n v

Thus gradually t m a d again Mr Khanna asked probing questions He mad me r ali e that my desir to go t Am rica had o er hadow d ll other on id tion I kne v what I d dn t want to be – a begg hopk ep o t t h wker – but I d d not know what my futu e should be Whe ever I put this ques tion to my father h aded t and gave only vague answers Education he would ay s a lifelong asset and once you have it you can alway find someth ng to do w th it

I as soon to lea n h w inad quate an answe th w s No educational authoritie a ywhe could reconcile themselves to this Educat on they ma ntained wa a liability if it made you a misfit f r your own soci ty Whil M Khanna had refrained from d sillus oni g me completely about my ambition he had frequently h nted at its vague ess O ce he t ld me I admire you a d your father for you amb tion but those who don t kn w y u will co ider it foolhardy You will receive mu h

discouragement, and you will have to learn to insulate yourself against it You are too sensitive and that s bad Especially so since you are blind Whatever you may do, you ll never convince the world that you are normal And if you go abroad, you will be even more isolated, for you ll miss your home and country

These were the thoughts which added to the turmoil of my mind, and whereas in Rawalpindi I had considered education to be a panacea, now I was not sure Mr Khanna was forcing me to be introspective, and at the same time making me aware of some of the problems which would come with education Yet my ambition had taken too great hold of me It had been a sustaining force throughout my four years of idleness, and no disillusionment could entirely checkmate it

I spent one hour a day with Mr Khanna which proved to be most valuable We talked about history and he would give me some lessons in English vocabulary Even Mr Baqir s classes grew more tolerable than my first day s impression

Though the time might have been spent more advantageously in a better school, I did not regret my attendance at Emerson I found the students very friendly and the feeling of being independent of having my own friends in students and Mr Khanna was exhilarating and dispelled all my first day s misgivings

I was very happy during the seven months at Emerson, for starting at seven twenty in the morning until five o clock in the evening when I reached home I was busy Then in the evening, I would go to Rastriya Swayam Sewak Sangh, the R S S S, a Hindu organization determined to bring about political freedom for India Sohan Lal a student at Sir Gunga Ram Medical Hospital, would come by for me each evening at seven o clock and together we would walk to the meeting grounds about a mile from my home

We would stay there until nine o clock, playing games doing calisthenics, but more than that, praying and singing hymns Almost all the people present were college students, and certainly I, at twelve, was the youngest person Since the day, independence was fast approaching, the topic of

with everyone, particularly students, was politics, and long after the last hymn had been sung we would sit around on the *ground talking over the current political situation*. There were hopeful people, there were frightened people. Some said that when the day of independence came India would start on a path of greatness equal to the Western world. Then there were others who saw nothing but gloom. They pointed to the increasing nationalistic sentiments among the Muslims as a sure sign of destruction of the very independence for which we had struggled so long. They felt that the Indians, divided among *themselves, would soon prove their inability to govern, and if* not the British then some other great power would come to take over.

As the time passed and we approached the months of December and January 1946 and 1947, the tone of their talk changed. They pictured themselves as brave men who would rescue India from the bloody path toward which some fanatics were steering her.

Give us time, they would say, we'll stop bloodshed. *As the* pressure mounted for the partitioning of India, all differences were resolved into one common purpose: to try to keep India united. There was no scheme, no threat, nor much less any preparation for effecting these plans. But there was a sense of responsibility, of duty, of courage. Thus if I were not learning much Bible or arithmetic, I was being exposed to a variety of views, from Mr Baqi's fanaticism to Mr Khanna's historical *approach to the keen sense of the students who analysed the* currents of the time. There was an awareness of movement, of living in momentous hours, only darkened by the inward fear of the unknown.

TEN

Marriage in the Making

In the month of February, when we had been in Lahore al most four months, we heard through one of my father s friends about an eligible young dentist in Dehra Dun named Kakaji Mehrotra As always in such cases, a thorough investigation followed, in which the young man and his family background were scrutinized Even his friends were reviewed Did they drink? With the precision of a lawyer, the liabilities and assets were carefully evaluated

Even though her whole future happiness was at stake sister Pom, who as the eldest daughter, by tradition must be the first to marry, was given no hint of what was going on For this there were several reasons first because when a girl reaches the age of marriage, many inquiries are made, and almost all the network of relations keeps on the look out Since the families are so large, and remain in such close contact there may be hund reds of people who, without being told, bear the eligible mem bers of other families in mind So there are many leads, all of which have to be carefully tracked down, and it is thought best not to worry the children with these steps Then too since the parents ultimately make the decision they deem it un necessary to consult the child prior to the settlement of final arrangements

As Kakaji was a more attractive prospect than any other leads, his parents were finally approached – for the initiative always rests with the girl s parents Then his family follows the same intricate process of thorough investigation often with the help of relatives on the spot If they are favourably impressed, then the parents, sometimes with their son come to view the girl in question But since Dehra Dun was so far from Lahore, Kakaji came by himself

In the early part of March he arrived in Lahore and casually dropped in for tea I say casually because his manner was that but with th network of elaborate planning behind the event it was actually anything but casual Sister Pom – she was now nineteen – wa sent for and came with Mother into the drawing room Dre sed in a soft silver bordered *a i* she shyly served Kakaji tea while he co tinued to talk t other members of the fam ly Du ing the t a he addressed some remarks to sister Pom about her studies in college and the painting over th mantelpiece and told h r about h s summer practice at a hill station

(After thi hort interview on wh ch so much dep nds if Kakaji i attracted to sister Pom and fa ourably impress s our family the t lk procee l but w thout si ter Pom s p esence Kakaji judic usly ke ps f om committing himself until he has sp ken to hi parents If he doesn t like l er the matter is dropped)

Actually four day later a note arrived from his mother ask ng if iste Pom could b betrothed to Kakaji My father with his Western attitudes ref ained from answering the letter until si te Pom was consulted So in the drawing room one night Mothe approach d ster Pom as to what she thought of Kakaji B fore P m said anything si ter Umi amused by all the a rangem nts rema k d H w do you expect her t know what he mind s wh n all they talk d about was the furniture? Could she h ve fall n n l e already—

Lo e U mil my fatl r a swered means something very differ nt from falling in love It is a *process* rath r than an act and only time c n hap t The best we an do is give it every opp rtunity t succe d and I ll adm t this is hard

But doe t e ery opportun ty in lude knowing the per son better? sist r Umi asked

Yes it sh uld Father replied but here the quest on is of hoos ng To know a per o tho oughly m ght take yea s Now we bel e e th t kn wing can nly com th ough li ing t gether

Do you mean th n said Umi that know ng and love are the same thing?

Not quite, but understanding and respect are essential to mature love and this deep understanding cannot come from friendship alone. Even serious conversations can t fully reveal a person s character That can only come through experience, through sharing each other s problems No amount of talking will bring about full understanding It is only when you con sider each other s problems as one and the same that you can hope for true understanding

But, Father, said Nimi who was the political rebel in the family look at the risk that s involved

We minimize the risk as far as possible he explained We try to find a home which is most like ours Take Kakaji He s a dentist. His life will not be too different from mine. Now if I were to marry Promila in the Brahman caste, I would be in creasing the gamble. They might not eat meat, they would pray two or three times a day and their professions would be on totally different lines These things are small, perhaps but they have far reaching effects

Nimi spoke again Then you are perpetuating a caste, be cause this presupposes that Pom would have to be married in the Kshatriya caste of professional people. For myself I'd willingly marry a Bania shopkeeper or even a Sundra untouchable, and help break down these barriers

That day might come But you will admit, Nirmil, that you are increasing the gamble.

But for a cause I believe in said Nimi

Yes he answered but that s another matter

You say Umi broke in that understanding and respect are necessary for a happy marriage I don t see why you would respect a person more because you lived with him and shared his problems

In our society, said Father we think of respect as coming only through sacrifice.

Then said Umi, you re advocating the subservience of women Because it s not Kakaji who will sacrifice but sister Pom And why should that be? And how is it that sister Pom will respect Kakaji because she sacrificed for him?'

No U mil it is the other way around It is he who wi r spect her for h r acrifice

Does that mean that sister Pom will espect Kakaji though?

No necessarily But if Kakaji i moved by Pr mila s sacrif ces h will ho v more considerati n and gro ving concern fo her I know in my o n case I wa moved to the depths to se you mother Shanti uffer o It took me long enough to long I believe to ach th t understanding perhaps becau e had broken away fr m the old traditions and had given in t the W st rn influence Y u can hope then for this respect t be reciprocal b twe n Promila and Kakaji and don t forg that all th s time th y a e getting to under tand each othe better

Umi persisted This may take years and is siste Pom to b unhappy all this time?

Perhap so But she is t iving for ultimate happiness an love These a e pr ci us gift vhich can only be culti ated i t me

Hard only for P m s ste Umi in i ted Aren t you stru by the injustice of th ? Shouldn t Kakaji sacrifice for the happine too?

There has to be a start Rem mber it s h r life that s joine with hi She w ll fo ake he past to bu ld a n w future an you may call this a c mplete beginning of absolutely ne e per ence If both P omila and Kakaji w re to be obstinate an wa t to see who w ll t ke the fi t tep what hope d y u hav of their ever g tti g t geth r?

That evad ng my questi n Fath r Why shouldn t he tak th nitiati ?

He w uld p rh ps be xp cted t if Promila were wo kin too a d lead ng an th lif which w uld be qual t h s suppose m re than this I really can t say and there may b some i ju tic at that

What i thi happ nes y u peak of? sa d sister Umi only vaguely understand it

It s a uniting of ideal and purpo es and making them blen into one Lov grows gradually This is the trad tion of ou

society, and these are the means we have adopted to make our marriage successful and beautiful We must have faith in the goodness of the individuals, and rely on the strength of this sacred bond In the West they have solved the problem in a different way, because their conditions vary from ours I cannot say if it has worked any better

But I love my independence, said sister Umi, for that is my ideal

Remember always said Father that the ideals must be re solved by placing values on every one of them for you must choose among them

Then to sister Pom he said I have done my best and my responsibility for you is not over I will always be there to help, and continue to find satisfaction in your happiness I have lived and worked for these values

And I respect your values and your judgement replied sister Pom I have faith in your choice. Even if I do suffer I can hope that some day our marriage will be as happy as yours

Then with Umi and Nimi chattering and Father and I fol lowing along behind, we went to bed leaving Mother and sister Pom together in the drawing room

The engagement ceremony is a simple one and was performed a few days after our conversation in the drawing room by a learned *pandit* who recited the *Gayatri Mantra* from the *Rig Veda* and invoked the blessings of the gods for the future hap piness of the couple A ring was placed on Pom s finger by Kakaji s sister, who brought a brocade *sari* and a veil and sweets along with the ring The platter of fresh baked sweetmeats was a big one and a servant began passing it to the friends and relatives who had been invited for the ceremony

While sister Pom sat in the corner with her face completely covered by the veil her intimate friends and our near relatives sang the songs which have been sung on similar occasions for generations – to the simple beat of the *dholki* a small drum No man is permitted to be present at this ceremony, but curious brothers are sometimes able to hide near the door and listen the ladies sing Now and then they stopped to make jokes

expense of the br de to-be who is supposed to smile and cry beneath her ve l for th words and moods of the songs vary from utter sad ess at the g l s leaving her family to jubilant singing o er the new l fe awaiting the bride

As I li tened I wonde ed what must be going on in sister Pom s mind and I was glad that she had the privacy of the ve l

As brothe Om Cousin Yog and I crouched by the closed door e could hardly mak out the emarks for the lad es all chatte ed at th am time Sho tly b fo e midnight a supper was er ed and then the older ladies depa ted giving s ster Pom solemn ad ice about preparation f r marriage Soon her tea ing gi l friends left al o p om ng to be back for the wed d ng which wa still t o months away

If the weddi g was go ng to b on time all the preparations had to be squeezed into th interim Actually th y would have been well under way eve without the prosp ct of a g oom had it not been fo th time pent on the finishing t uches for ur house

The fi st step was t begin collecting the dowry Originally in Ved c times the b de was adorned simply and affectionat ly and the d w y nsi t d of o m re tha a few pre ents from the family t the wedd g I oon lea ned how d ffere t it was now Sister Pom dowry mu t i clude cl the jewellery bed ding a sewing mach cooking utens ls and cutlery – in fact e erything for a hom sa e a ca and the hou e tself wh ch might ha been ncluded had t n t be n f r the three you ger s ste h se dowry h d to m tch ter Pom s The splend ur of th s d ry might w ll det mine the subsequent offers to my other th e te nd my grandmoth ca efully can assed many of our lati e as to th pre nts they w uld gi e to the bride so that th re m ght be o dupl cation

Altho gh a few of th relati e th ught the n mber of tw ty two *s* was ath r f w mo t e ns nt d Long d ys were spent by Mother and si t Pom going to owd d bazaars and choo ng the *s* wh h ha l t d ffer in m te i l c lours and bord r No two ould be al ke and even tho gh th ex pen ive ones of Benar s brocade cost hund eds of *r pees* the

wardrobe was supposed to be so rich in variety that the bride could have a *sari* for each and every occasion for many years to come Actually, *saris* are very practical garments Always six yards in length, they fit every size of woman be she short or tall slender or stout, merely with a few subtle adjustments of the folds

Jewellery, matching the *saris*, had to be made to order Be cause until recently the laws of inheritance in India favoured the male members of the family at the expense of the widow, a woman s most valued possessions were her gold and dia monds These jewels alone formed her *istri dhan* her inheri tance which could not be taken away from her after her husband s death according to Manu the great Hindu lawgiver My mother had recited to me the law of Manu sometime before The ornaments which may have been worn by women during their husband s lifetime his heirs shall not divide Those who divide them shall be outcasts

However many packages Mother and sister Pom brought home from their frequent trips to the bazaar the bundles did not tell the whole story There was the constant hum from the veranda of the two sewing machines operated by friendly tail ors who had been engaged to help with the preparations They sewed pillowcases embroidered borders for a few *saris* which had been purchased plain and made blouses jumpers and gowns Since in India hardly anything can be bought ready made the tailors also helped hem tablecloths and bedspreads which my sisters and their friends were kept busy embroidering There were also the regular visits of the jewellers who brought with them bags full of necklaces, rings and bracelets in order that my other sisters and Father could be consulted before a final selection was made The house was full of new odours – of threads and linen, of flowers and cosmetics It was chaos I found it difficult to move about without stumbling over one bundle after another and the beds and chairs were piled up with dozens of half unwrapped packages

While the ladies made these preparations for the dowry the men were busy arranging for the *barat* the bridegroom s

whi h consists of his many r latives and friends Although the bridegroom s family is burdened with the expenses of their transportation it falls upon the family of the bride to be the hosts during the three day marriage ceremony It was fortunate fo us that the distance of thr hundred miles between Dehra Dun and Lahore would p e nt Kakaji from bringing a party of two hundred which although the highest number permitted in any ma riage wa quite appropr ate to his social status Be sides becau e of th famine in Bengal at that time (which took a toll of two mill on liv) the government did not allow a *ba t* of more than fifty to be entertained

Here and th e the w re surr pt tious suggestions although never from the *ba t* that my fathe could easily circumvent this ruling but h stubbornly r fused It was well for our pocket book that my fath r would not break the ruling of the very gov ernme t wh ch he ser d because had the number of the *ba at* exceed d fifty we would probably ha e been forced to hi e at great expen e a *j j gha* a community buil ling for their hous ing As it was by doubling up som of the families in the Mehta *Gi lle* th acated houses could be used for the barat Bu lap sacks of gr und wheat fo *pu* the little pancakes fruit and sp ces chi ke s l gs of mutton mounds of rice wer lugged in – enough to feed a regiment Arrangements w e made for pool ing servants of th M hta a d Mehra (my mother s) families, and shoeshin boys a d barbers were engaged from May 10 th ough May 13

Along with the housing of the *ba at* there were also two hundred of our relations expect d fr m all o er Ind a who had to be looked after Ea h of the Mehta and Mehra families in Lahor pr mi ed to make available a few beds f those who came from lo ger d tances and floor space for tho e who were com ng f om the neighbou hood Thus for the two months between the e gagement a d the actual wedding ceremony the house was tak n up with frantic p parat on Everyone took an interest in each step and what I d I not feel or h ar or stumble ver wa ca efully explained to me a indeed was the whole wedding ceremony with all its pomp colour and splendour

On the morning of the tenth, brother Om and I stood across the street from the Mehta *Gullie* I heard car after car, some borrowed, some hired, pull away for the station Neither Father nor brother Om nor I could go to the station because we had to wait for the formal meeting the *milni* It was a long while before the cars started streaming back into the Mehta *Gullie* filled, as brother Om told me, with bright but tired looking people The shoeshine boys were in a more fortunate position than we, for at least they could be close to Kakaji right then, and we would have to wait until the evening The servants and my cousins were at great premium at home because they brought snatches of news about the *barat* Now three of the *barat* were having haircuts Kakaji had just breakfasted and two barbers were quarrelling as to who would shave him Now all the *barat* was out in the cars for sight seeing They had lunched already Our cooks were gratified because they had eaten heartily Tea was over, one servant reported and Kakaji had eaten three pastries Now all were getting dressed for the *ghori* the mar riage procession

No sooner did we hear about the *ghori* than all the necklaces of lights which were strung around our house were lighted up From the Mehta *Gullie*, less than a block away from our home I heard the band strike up the blending of trumpets and clari nets drums and cymbals, into one of the popular cinema tunes and I knew the *ghori* was on its way I slipped rapidly into my long coat like *achkan*, and had my father tie my turban up and ran out on the street with brother Om The turban and *achkan* felt awkward and the *achkan* rustled like a *sari*

I have never worn an *achkan* before I said

I never would, brother Om said, if it were not for Mother s insistence upon observing the tradition

From the gate of our house I listened to the gay music of the band and in my mind I pictured Kakaji mounted on a *ghori*, a well bred and trained mare From Kakaji s waist there was undoubtedly a sword, symbolizing his readiness to defend the woman against his enemies and to ensure the inviolability of the home to which he would bring his bride I thought about the

horse with all its ornamental trappings and wondered am dst the loud music, whether Kakaji or the *gho i* was the more nervous Pr bably Kakaji since the *ghori* had gone through similar experience The band music got slightly muffled

Th y ha e probably taken a detour brother Om said to show off the groom

And ad rtise si te Pom s marriage I said

Thu far it was Kak ji s eve ing He rode on the horse because he was a kn ght comi g to get his bride As of old it was a chi alrous and heroic thing and like all knights he possessed moral and physical courage

As soon as the *gh i* turned into our street brother Om desc bed to me Kakaj s p k silk turban and its gilded cro n, load d w th garlands f flowers

Here he is I shout d and my father his friends and relations a d th *pa d t* gathe ed by the gate for the *mil i* By now all the guests had alighted from thei cars and they tood fa i g u each one of them ha ng been ga landed Some of my sister s fri nds w inside engaged in the ceremony of dressing her in the t aditional red bro aded w dding which I had s en ea l e while other f iends were e aluating the worth of the d wry whi h was set out on e hibition i the drawing room.

Th *b i* p oc io with Kakaji on his ho se at the head app oach d cl s r and clo e but slowly y slowly as though to gi e us time fo ev y la t a rangement The band k pt up its fury playing medl y after m dl y blanketing all other sound Kakaji s horse halt d ght in th passageway formed between th ow of guests on de and all of us on the other Th band imm diately stopped playing a d a chapel like qu et re gned as the *pa d i* stepped forward He rec ted Vedic hymns in oking bles gs f om the Alm ghty The *p d i* th n called my father fo the *m l* the ceremony of i trod ct n between the fathers of th bride and the bridegroom As Kakaji s father had d ed year ago the mb a e was ex ha ged between his uncle Dr Pr ka h and my f ther Afte my f ther s introductio import a t mal relat ons f the b id g oom w re called to meet the respective relat ons of th bride We made presents, for the most

part in cash, to our opposite number in the *barat* Kakaji had no younger brother or a substitute for my *milni*, so I thrust my present back into my pocket

Kakaji, who had remained on horseback during the ceremony now moved forward to the steps leading to our house where my sisters and their girl friends were waiting with buckets full of flower petals The servants were running around, spraying people with scented water and helping my sisters hurl the petals Kakaji was surrounded by the teasing girls and brother Om and I helped him to alight Presumably sister Pom had a choice, until that moment, to refuse Kakaji, because it was she who had to garland him as a sign of her acceptance The *jaimala* she did shyly without a word

As the band struck up again, brother Om and I led Kakaji to an empty room Here we had a chance to chat with him for a little while This time he was in a freer mood than we had seen him at our tea table and he even jested about the elaborate arrangements we had made Soon after sisters Nimi and Umi came in, and they started arranging for Kakaji s dinner I went out and listened to the colourful sounds which filled the air and brought excitement to a fever pitch Servants were running to and fro serving the twenty piece band My uncles were leading the whole procession of the *barat* upstairs where they were to have their dinner

On our back porch a row of *halwais* sat preparing large cauldrons of food in makeshift fireplaces There was the ceaseless noise of their stirring something in the cauldrons and the noise of clapping as they shaped *puris* They must be making a *puri* a second, I thought and I remembered the famine in Bengal I walked up and down the rows of *halwais* guests and orchestra members feeling in my unfamiliar *achkan* as though I were another wedding ornament – with legs on Friends of my father greeted me warmly Servants asked me to go inside and rest, and the drum player showed me his tight coat belt, with an ornamental buckle All our two hundred guests were there *en masse*, milling about waiting to be fed For them there was a long wait ahead, however, because the *barat*, as our

guests would be served first and only then our relatives And I would have to wait until the very end

I ha e been looking for you brother Om shouted above the din of voic s We ha e to go upstairs and meet the *ba at*

The feasting was over by midnight the band had been dis m ssed and some of our relatives had gone to bed with full stomachs Other relatives close friends and th *barat* gathered around the *di* and took their places on the floor for the actual w dd ng cer mony Earlier I had helped with the decoration of the *ved* the wedding arch which had been built in the centre of the courtyard F ur posts of banana trunks had been firmly set in the ground to f m an eight foot square Twigs with green leaves formed the arcades around whi h were hung fruit and flowers balloons and tring of coloured lights A b ass cauldron was pla ed in the centre for the sacramental fire which in Vedic tes i cons dered th purifier

The *pand t* who was to pe form th ceremony cleared his th oat repeatedly and ilence g ew to suspense Sister Nimi whispered t me that Kakaji and sister Pom we e sitting on low stool with u hions e t to my mother and father looking very grave. Now the *pand t* walked into the arcade and started the *h* the l ghting of the sacred *agn* The fire crackled as the *p nd t* fed it with butter chips of scented wood and incense A huge platter of perfumed salts was passed around the circle and I took a handful

A p n h will do sister Nimi whispered

I tr ed to aim my fi tful at th flame and prayed that I would miss the *pa d t*s head The fi s zled and the whole courtyard was fill d with the str g aromatic scent The *pa d t* began chanting the Vedic hymns i Sanskrit in his soft melancholy vo ce. He paused now and then for Kakaji and sister Pom to repeat the Sansk t ows after h m Compared to the *p d t*'s deli ery theirs seem d hes ta t and uncertain but the voices of both of them p tch d tog ther f r the first time, sounded good

After the vows had been taken he translated them for the benefit f the bride a d groom Both of them had promised to

live according to the Hindu creed, to be true to each other, share each other s burdens propagate the race, beget sons, remain firm and faithful like a rock

They are putting their feet on a piece of stone side by side, sister Nimi explained, and now they have started circling the *vedi*

I knew they would have to circle seven times, symbolizing the invocation of the seven planets Having gone around the ceremonial fire, the bridegroom addressed my sister in a hymn

Become thou my partner as thou hast paced all the seven steps with me Apart from thee I cannot live Apart from me do thou not live We shall share alike all goods and power combined Over my house you shall bear full sway

The first day of the three day ceremony was ended when Kakaji took sister Pom over to the Mehta *Gullie* for a few minutes so that she might be introduced to the members of the *barat* who had not attended the wedding This was an exercise of his will which symbolized that the bride was his and that she was no longer a part of her own family But the formal departure of my sister was to come after another two days of feasting the *barat* For each meal the party came with a band, but a small one consisting of only five people

The pageant came to an end on the third evening with the *doli*, when in a car bedecked simply with flowers the bride and groom drove away from our house with the whole caravan of the *barat* on their heels None of our relatives were in the caravan, only Father, Mother Nimi Umi Om Usha Ashok and myself drove in the last car This was the first time in those three days that all of us had been together, and then, too alone The whole caravan moved at a camel s pace, and I remember feeling hot and uncomfortable as though the *havan* itself was burning inside that car I felt sorry for Kakaji and sister Pom who would have almost no time alone together before facing the ordeal of still another reception upon their arrival in Dehra Dun, this time given by the *barat*

Even though we had left our relatives behind I could still hear their voices as they saw sister Pom off, voices which seemed

2

PAKISTAN & TRANSITION

ELEVEN

'Divide et '

In February 1947 my father prohibited me from attending RSSS meetings, which had now become militant Children of civil servants, he reminded us like their parents, could not join political organizations

Whereas before our house had been filled with happy excite ment over wedding plans now it had the tenseness of uncer tainty On the streets could be heard slogans of processions *Leyke rahengy Pakistan jaise liya tha Hindustan* – We will take Pakistan just as we once took Hindustan and Unionist Ministry *murdabad* – Death to the Unionist Ministry

At first we climbed to our terrace and silently listened to the shouts of hate We would all stand side by side, with our hands resting on the railing leaning forward to catch every word They sounded too threatening, too unreal for belief Whereas before, my sisters had always explained what they saw, now they re mained quiet As these processions grew in frequency and were no longer a curiosity, we stopped going to the terrace Whereas before we had discussed politics and the fast approaching day of independence with great enthusiasm now we avoided it We felt uncomfortable in one another s company and the conversa tion ceased to come spontaneously Often we spoke too loudly, our voices jarring each other s nerves, in the hope of drowning out the cries for blood outside

Jhanda, whose husky voice each day called *Phal bibiji?* – Fruit, madam? was heard no more For twenty years he had carried fruit to the Mehta family and had often distributed free mangoes or pears to the children on the street All that now was in the past, for he was a Muslim, and might be denied burial rights if he sold food to Hindus

The British posed as the only guardians of Muslim rights, and
some Muslims did not waste any time in playing up to them
Sir Sayed Ahmad, an outstanding educationist, advised the Mus
lims that their hope rested with the British, and they must re
main loyal to the government

Aligarh College, which the British helped to found, became a
sort of headquarters for promoting this divide and rule policy
The college was for Muslims only and in 1906 Mr Archbold,
the British principal of Aligarh College, played a decisive role
in encouraging a few dependable Muslims to ask for a separate
electorate According to plan, the British hailed this demand of
the deputation as representative of the Muslim sentiment
throughout the country, and separate electorates for Hindus and
Muslims were granted This was the first time that an outright
distinction was drawn between the two communities

This policy was well timed for it prevented all Muslims from
throwing their lot in with the Congress Party Aligarh was to
train leaders who preached a doctrine of the separate identity of
Muslim and Hindu Englishmen could not have asked for better
agents for executing their designs, since these leaders were Mus
lims themselves, educated and trained orators whose words had
more impact on the masses than if an outsider had tried to
persuade them of their right to an Islamic state

Thus, gradually but skilfully, the emotions of the masses were
manipulated until the wave of nationalistic feeling culminated
in the formation of the Muslim League Historians concur that
if religion had not been used to drive a wedge between the
two communities, no amount of effort by the British or the
Muslim leaders in Aligarh, striving for personal power, could
have torn them asunder

Even so, many distinguished Muslims did not desert the Con
gress Party but remained true to its goal of independence with
out partition Yet these leaders, who at the most crucial moment
might have checked the growing number of adherents to the
Muslim League, were placed in jail with other Congress leaders
during the Second World War, while the Muslim League was
at liberty to carry on its activity with unabated zeal At the end

Hindus retaliated by rousing their own people they were sure to be ruthlessly fired upon We knew, for instance, that whenever there was a procession of Muslims and the police were called out to disperse it, they never used tear bombs, *lathee* charge, or gas as had been used by their predecessors They would simply arrest the Muslim leaders heading the procession and carry them a few miles distant to where Muslim League cars were waiting to bring them back to regroup and remobilize their forces We knew all this, and more But whereas my father took this as a sign of the darkest evil to follow, Chachaji took it more lightly than the situation demanded

Let s walk over to Chachaji s, my father said, and all of us went to Chachaji s house As usual, he was seated on the ver anda surrounded with papers and books carefully reading them and meticulously taking notes I could imagine his frown on our arrival even though I could not see it He was happy enough to see us but he knew that on our arrival the whole issue would be opened again, and confident as he was of the esteem in which he was held by the younger members of the family he did not cherish an argument

So do we have to go over it all again, Amolak Ram? he asked my father

Chachaji, you ve got to listen to us In your house there are ten women and one of them is pregnant There is no sense in taking chances Now I beg of you either send these women to our house and let us try to improvise some kind of shelter or hiding place there or let me bring my daughters here I still feel that my house is safer’

Don t you understand, Chachaji interrupted him that I feel just as responsible, if not more so as you do about the wo- men in the family?

I don t deny that My father tried to justify himself

Then leave it to me and let me handle it my way

The upshot of the two-hour session was that we returned home no nearer to convincing Chachaji than we had been when we left As we walked home my father remarked, If he won t listen to me, Shanti, I must act on my own responsibility I have

talked this over with Bishan Das (our next door neighbour w th whom we shared a common wall) and he tells me that all the Hindu fam lies in this neighbou hood can gather in his home without going into the streets while v e men can guard the terrace with guns That s the only solution

Whatever you ay *j o*

My father closed v ith the remark This may mean abandon ing our h me but the tim s have changed and it is not going to be property that s at take but l fe

Next morning even befo e I was up I heard a soft knock on the doo

Who s *it?* I a ked

Sohan an ered my f iend from the R S S S who was eighte n fiv y a s older than I

My room was on the far side of the house and Sohan had been *able to rea h it unob e ved My fathe had strictly fo bidden me* to entertain gue ts f om the R S S S for rumour had it that hou es of m mbe s of the *gh* we e topmo t on the lists of Mu l m League le d s who i cited the mobs

I ope ed th door It so good to see y u Sohan! Tell me what h happ ned I heard th t the *s ngh* was banned three days ag What i happening?

Wait a minut boy – k ep a ool h ad h said This is not l ke y urself Ye the tu t on very seriou It seems ery whe e I g pe pl a e jitt ry I am convinced that the time is appr ach ng f the Mu lim L agu plan to be put into acti n. They ay e en Mayo M an Am r d Din ha a s pply of fire-arm n hi home and di t buting them f ee to Mu lims and sending ea h day fo mo e

I heard of that I told him My sisters were speaking about it only ye terd y

Ye he s not mak g any ec et of it

What are we g ing to do Sohan?

It s what can we do? In the meetings when I brought up th ubject a d t lked abc ut th l ader h p of C dhi th y took me se jou ly en ugh but th y d dn t do anythi g I tell y u leaders l ke Gandhi ar outmoded They have done their work

for India They are too idealistic to cope with these hooligans

You know what you re saying Sohan?

I know – it s heresy I mean it, though

I could not dispute his earnestness This feeling had been at the back of our minds for many months yet no one had put it as bluntly as Sohan He was always calm and collected and his words were well chosen They were keen and sharp and yet delivered with the greatest confidence How many times I had heard him at the *sangh* talking with such fervour that even the most devoted members of the Congress Party could not resist his arguments

I believe you, I said You are almost always right, Sohan

Well I don t know about that, but I think I m right this time Look here we must begin to plan I love your sisters and family as though they were my own (His family was out of the so-called danger zone) You can t wait any longer

That s what Father told us yesterday he has a plan and, Sohan I think it s still secret

I respect your father Have no fear on that score By the way, what does Chachaji say?

He s still immovable as ever

I thought so You know, I wish I were old enough to go and talk to that man

I m not sure even you could convince him of anything I saw him last night in action He certainly seems to have good arguments

'What are they?

You know, he talked about history and how amicably Hindus and Muslims have lived together

Yes he s just as archaic as the rest of the Congress people. Why don t they understand the changing times? They speak of history but what about the British history, I ask you? These times haven t changed overnight you know They are the steady work of a century Or does he just skip that hundred years?

Don t be harsh on him, Sohan He thinks differently He can t see how some foreign power can disrupt the good relations of centuries He sees all this in a larger perspective

And then he left as it was nearing the time for my parents to get up What a wonderful and determined fellow, I thought Sohan s courage was contagious, and I waited eagerly for his next visit

my own, and I d hate to see anything happen to them This is a dangerous situation !

I m very grateful to you, Shekh Sahib for your kindness

Well, I told my wife perhaps you d feel the way you do but she still wanted me to come and tell you, and I m glad for that I can t say I blame you

I m glad you are understanding

For thirty seven years Doctorji, we ve known one another I ve seen your children grow up with mine My daughters love yours like their own sisters But however that may be –

I m sure my daughters feel the same way

I wish all this didn t have to happen, but then wishing won t do any good I m sorry, yes, I m sorry

I was almost moved by the sincerity of this man Even Sohan I thought, couldn t scoff at this but then again maybe he could Hadn t he told me how clever these Muslims were and how all of them were being asked to form Pakistan in the name of Mohammed?

Very kind of you, Shekh Sahib my father said and I would always trust you, but –

I know what you mean Doctorji You don t have to explain it any further Let s leave it at that

My father, whose presence of mind was admirable fumbled for words I wondered if he too was experiencing the same conflict to believe or not to believe After an uneasy pause Shekh Sahib began again

Well if you won t let me do any more Doctorji one thing I hope you ll permit me to do It will give me great satisfaction As you know I have my own well and I d like to have you draw your water from there

What an absurd idea this was I thought Surely they couldn t contaminate the reservoir for that would poison Hindus and Muslims alike

Why will I need water? my father asked

It may be that your house will be set on fire, and if you had water, plenty of it, you might be able to save part of it You know the fire brigade won t come to your call

I suppo.e not At least not to save a Hindu s house

Well then Shekh Sahib continued I expect that we could run a pipeline from my tank u der the st eet and connect ı with yo r wat l c l h a d v talk about how low your water pressur ı st ould not be suffi ient ın ca e of an emergency Yo ce f y u hou we n h l oul In t stretch a hose from my house ɔ h lp you Fo h n I d be a traitor and my fa.e w uldn t be an be t than yours

I wa c n m fu d and baffl d Tha ɩ ould mean ıskı g ur li es to if the c our couldn t be contaminated, Sh kh Sah b ll pu poı n ın his tank That was just as bad as g ng to th hou

That gc c of you Shekh Sahib I d like to talk it o w th my f

Well I lea you Doctorji

Th n I h my fa h h w h m to th door This was such a d ffe nt t t m Sohan and I w s so completely lost in tho gh ı g l h m a g f ıt all that I fo g t to keep my pla b hind th u ta and soon my father found me.

Y u h d all

Ye Dad

And what d d vou th k of ıt?

Th w alwav h wa H espe ted e erybody s opinion. We br th s t d wn n th c u h

I d n t th nk I h ld lik to go there I told him I d rather be bu n d I d I d pr f r f w dn t accept his water e th If h h u ha t bu down t mus but we shouldn t ri k our l s by d inki g the wat

I thi k th s me way son But I wı.h you could have seen hi fa H w a e t

I ould tel ıf m h s oı e but even so –

Even so h a d Tha th q t on ı n ıt?

We at th r for a l ng whil w thout say ng anything to one an ther At l t my fathe sa d I m st go and talk it over w h you moth I don t e a mu h about the property as I care about h rt g Shekh S h b f el ng You ha e only known him as our good neighbour but to me h is a *guru* I started my

college education with him For thirty seven years I have known him and he is like a father to me. You can t understand the veneration I feel for him Even today he is one of those Muslims who believe in one India Indeed, he is publishing letters pleading for calmness and for one nation

He left me sitting there by myself just as Sohan had in the morning How paradoxical it was to trust yet not to trust I was glad that the decision rested with my father, not with me But I was mistaken about that He called us all into the bedroom and repeating the scene to my sisters, asked us what we thought should be done

My youngest sister, Usha, didn t have much to say, brother Om was definitely opposed to trusting Shekh Sahib He would rather risk antagonizing him than forsake the safety of our home for the whim of one man Sister Umi commented on the nerve of the man and was amused that he was earnest or seemed sincere Nimi however, took a different position

Daddyji, we ll have to trust someone If we don t have faith or trust, what is to become of us? The mature people will have to keep their heads and not succumb to the temper of the times This is our test I m not afraid of dying and I d as soon die from poisoned water as commit suicide

She was right, I thought, and very convincing This was our test and we must meet it squarely Then my father interjected Your mother feels the same way as sister Nimi I will keep myself neutral and put the question once again to all of you now that everyone has commented I don t want to influence you and I ll take responsibility for the final action But I want to know exactly how you feel Yes or no? he asked me first

I think sister Nimi is right

Brother Om was lost for words I still think that we oughtn t to do it But sister Nimi has a very strong point I m not sure

Sister Umi was more thoughtful now and we had to wait some time for an answer Finally she spoke, and in one breath I m willing to go ahead with Shekh Sahib s idea

Then my father addressed Om Do you still feel very stron about your contention?

When I went to bed that night, so much had come to pass that the thoughts of Shekh Sahib, Bishan Das Chachaji Sohan and sister Nimi all tossed in my mind I waited for Sohan s return, to me, he was not an outsider

I was up next morning early and Sohan did not disappoint me I heard his gentle rap on the door and I hastened to open it.

Come in Sohan Am I glad to see you!

This time rather than my being impatient it was he who could not wait to hear the happenings of the day before I told him all

For a long time he was thoughtful Finally he said All this Ved, is so ironic, so incongruous! Here you are, making preparations to escape, and then you hand over your lives to the mercy of one Muslim You tell me about faith and trust but do not lose sight that it s the bugle of religion that the Muslim League leaders have sounded

Stop Sohan Don t go on! I don t wish to be disillusioned You say ironic you comment about irony in our home But what about history?

Precisely so, Ved Like life history is nothing but a tragic irony Take the British, for instance You and I both admire them, think of them as the greatest people on earth sometimes, even over our nationals These calculating Britishers were positive almost until the end of the Second World War when the Conservative ministry felt that they had played their cards with good care and that finally their divide and rule policy had reached its climax They were going to prove to the world how unfit we were to rule ourselves Well, then even they miscalculated Don t you see that? Do you see the irony?

I see it too well

Yes, they failed to discern the impact of the Congress Party and Gandhiji They turned out to be much more stupid than you and I could have thought possible I have been thinking about Chachaji and perhaps this morning I understand him better than I did yesterday You see he continued perhaps Chachaji is too much of a historian He cannot see the and the contradictions

THIRTEEN

The Bugle Sounds

On the night of the first of March, the few trusted Hindu labourers who had helped build our home were called in and the pipes were installed, leading to Shekh Sahib s house Whatever attempts had been made to hide the nature of this project, the night had not been dark enough the labourers not silent enough to prevent the neighbours from discovering that something was going on They probably dismissed it as something wrong with our water system, for the project on which we were launched was so inexplicable that no one in his right mind would have suspected it From that night on we started drinking the water of Shekh Sahib and even relishing our own trepidation

The same Hindu labourers were retained for the night of the second of March to install the steel door which had been smuggled in in a closed van But they did not show up for the Khizar ministry of Punjab – a coalition of Congress and Unionist parties – resigned that day, touching off a powder keg

Khizar the Prime Minister of Punjab had earned the ill will of Muslims and non Muslims alike The Muslims considered him disloyal because he did not cater to all the demands of the Muslim League the non Muslims found his indecision unpalatable He was a man caught in the vice of trying to please two opposing groups, with the result that he antagonized both

On the next day, the third of March, all the non Muslim parties Congress Hindu and Sikh held a meeting in the Assembly Chamber in Lahore They knew that while they could not form a new ministry without the co-operation of the Muslim League so the league could not form a ministry without their support Although frightened at the thought of a Muslim League ministry they decided to withhold their support

While they were reaching this decision within the

The house was packed, and still the people kept on coming until we were pressed together body to body Then the leaders appeared The very presence of Congress Party leaders on the same stage with men like Tara Singh who felt no compulsion to use non violent means to stop the bloodshed seemed to imply the victory of the strong heads and their attitude that, let the Muslims start something the Hindus and Sikhs would retaliate The leading question was, however, what would they retaliate with? To be sure at the waist of each Sikh hung a *kirpan*, but they were primitive compared to the guns and bombs which had been distributed to the Muslims

Men like Giani Karter Singh spoke in enraged voices The crowd responded in unison With perfect cadence they roared they cheered, they shouted slogans Their voices clashed against the walls, and echoed back to amplify the ferocious cries

Then, instantaneously as Tara Singh came forward the cries of the crowd were smothered as though by a great blanket, and the air became heavy and thick with hot moist breathing Tara Singh delivered his famous words with resolution and heat

Oh, Hindus and Sikhs! Be ready for self-destruction like the Japanese and the Nazis Our motherland is calling for blood and we shall satiate the thirst of our mother with blood By crushing Moghulistan we shall trample Pakistan I have been feeling for many a day now that mischief has been brewing in the province and for that reason I started reorganizing the Akali Party If we can snatch the government from the Britishers no one can stop us from snatching the government from the Muslims We have in our hold the limbs and legs of the Muslim League and we shall break them Disperse from here on the solemn affirma tion that we shall not allow the league to exist The world has always been ruled by minorities The Muslims snatched the kingdom from the Hindus, and the Sikhs grabbed it from the hands of the Muslims and the Sikhs will even now rule over them We shall rule over them and shall get the government, fighting I have sounded the bugle. Finish the Muslim League!

The malice of Tara Singh s words was contagious and gripped one and all Men curled their fists and clenched

vants quarters, where we crouched between the back of the servants quarters and the wall Dazed with the action of the preceding days, I stopped listening There was nothing different to hear no different smells, and I sensed nothing My breathing steadied, and my heart stopped throbbing Was it resignation? Or was it that too much had happened to sort out?

I wondered what was this Hindu religion which had marked us for an ignominious death Religion my father had told us, was an individual matter Hindu religion was a way of life, enriched by centuries

Who were Muslims? For them, religion meant complete abandonment of individual personality In the villages, I had seen them sometimes all eating and drinking from the same containers to show the extent of their brotherly love Their eyes turned five times a day towards Mecca, and they kneeled and prayed to Mohammed They swore by the *Koran*

But in Hinduism, no prophet no one dogma no one sacred book bound believers together Our beliefs were as diverse and various as the climate geography and culture of the country We as individuals might even venerate Mohammed or Christ, as prophets, and still remain Hindus That was the power and pride of Hinduism for it tolerated all religions and embraced all ways of life Muslims, however knew no diversity They were united by one God, one prophet, one book – proselytism was their creed

Was I really a Hindu? I asked myself During childhood I had been profoundly influenced, insofar as a child can be, by the Christian love Since then we had sung hymns at Pindi and at the *sangh*, discussed values and ideals, and tried to conform to those But the values and ideals were of a society where Hindus and Muslims lived side by side, toiled in the fields shoulder to shoulder What was it that set us apart from the Muslims? Our old servant Gian Chand said the Muslim religion taught cruelty

The Muslim children Ved Sahib he said are taught to break Hindu statues Then Sohan said that most Muslims in the Punjab were weavers, cobblers, herdsmen, potters and black smiths that their mentality was low They were labourers

FOURTEEN

The Terror

NEXT morning the telephone jangled Sister Pom was waiting at the railway station and had been there all night

It is traditional in India that a girl returns to her mother s home during her first confinement and even though my father had written to Kakaji pointing out the dangers of sending sister Pom home, she had come Those like Kakaji who were not living in Punjab or the other exposed areas did not realize the peril we were in the riots in Allahabad on 23 August 1946, and Garh Mukteshwar in the Meerut district on 6 7 and 8 November in which many lives had been lost should have been taken as danger signals

So it was that failing to realize the seriousness of the situation, Kakaji allowed sister Pom to board the train and while we had spent another night sheltered she had endured it sitting on the platform without protection while stabbings had already begun in that neighbourhood My father rushed to bring her home she was overwrought but safe If the heavy responsibility for six children had weighed upon him before it was now increased by Pom and her unborn child

On the next day riots broke out all over West Punjab In Lahore shops were looted and burned Hindus and Sikhs were stabbed in Gumti Kinari and Kasera bazaars and Rang Mahal Those who still doubted that the Muslim League did not have a plan of action should have been convinced for the pattern the riots and mobs followed all over West Punjab was everywhere the same

Whereas for the few days preceding 4 March we had been comparatively inactive now we rushed about feverishly We had to install the steel door All the rooms must be stripped o carpets, curtains, pictures, anything that gave a sign of luxury

terrace of Bishan Das s house to keep watch The rest of us silently walked to the room which was to be the refuge of all women and children I felt self conscious If only I could see so that I, too, might keep watch on the terrace instead of retreating to a hiding place

We all had been calm behind the servants quarters at Cha chaji s without a roof over our heads but here where fifty persons crowded into a small room things were different The women shrieked and moaned, each bewailing her own misfor tune This was the despair of women who might never behold their husbands or sons again They might be abducted or bru tally raped like the women in the other parts of Punjab We child ren did not cry, but found a place in the corner where we might huddle unobserved

I wanted something to happen something to put an end to the suspense But it was not to be that night and the next morning we returned to the uncertain safety of our home

Even during the daytime there was no security The shouting and outcries continued unabated and rumours of murderous raids throughout the city and West Punjab filtered in Without a doubt, the Muslims had the upper hand and the Muslim League leaders might well relish their triumph for it was com plete Some Sikhs tried to mar the glory of their victory by plunging *kirpans* into a few Muslims but these casualties were too few in number for notice

We accustomed ourselves to the routine of the terror We listened to the news on the radio and that was our sole contact with the outer world Even at midday it was considered unsafe to leave the security of home Each afternoon Gian Chand would make the rounds of the Mehta and Mehra families and announce to us that another night had left them unharmed No one in the family went to school, or to shop My father alone ventured out to go to his office He was a doctor, and a government servant No riots could be allowed to interfere with that obligation When he left the question would he return repeatedly haunted us

If this was the state in one home which in the distant past had experienced happiness and gaiety, then what was

him capable of halting the destruction Surely, I thought, Sohan would come now to discuss the import of Panditji s visit, but he did not The twenty first of March my thirteenth birthday, came and went unnoticed, and still he did not come

When Pandit Nehru returned to Delhi the leaders of the Congress Party and the Muslim League began once again to debate around the conference table in Delhi while widespread destruction overtook the whole of West Punjab Trains were looted houses razed, villages destroyed with their herds crops and inhabitants Stabbings multiplied in the cities and rapes and abductions continued in the dominantly Muslim areas

It was not surprising that the Hindus and Sikhs in West Punjab were growing impatient with the ineffectual haggling around the Delhi conference table and were crying for the Hindu and Sikh brothers in India to act not talk and come to their aid immediately

Yet what could the Congress Party do? They had been de voted to the cause of independence for united India too long to abandon it now History and logic were on their side, for the cultural and economic ties bound India as one nation

Worn out by tedious negotiation fatigued by continuous rebukes from the Muslim League frustrated to find that their years of long labour were to be rendered futile unable to bear the prolonged pressure for action from Hindus and Sikhs in West Punjab and, finally convinced that almost all Muslims in West Punjab had responded to the call of religion and Jinnah the Congress leaders conceded Pakistan in May 1947 But if they had any hopes that this concession would end the chaos and anarchy they were very much mistaken, for the Muslims in the Punjab hailed this as another indication of their strength and power against the servility of the Hindus They were not satisfied with this first victory and they thought that by spurring their mobs on to fresh riots they could secure all of Punjab and Bengal for Pakistan But the Congress was under no misappre hensions that once Pakistan was formed the cries for Hindu and Sikh blood would subside They faced the grim possibility that all the Hindus and Sikhs in West Punjab would have to

evacuated and if all of Punjab were lost this task could never be performed

For once an E glishman Lord Mountbatten sided against the Muslims and considered their demand for all of Punjab and all of Bengal exo bitant and unreasonable So the Congress leaders stood firm with Lord Mountbatten as their backbone on the g ound that the p ovince of Punjab and Bengal would be d vid d rathe than ceded in their entirety Subsequently b undary commissions we e set up to determine the exact lines of demarcatio

All these negotiation did not stop the atrocities of the Muslims in West Punjab and even though in Lahore there was a mome tary lull after the he tic day of early March we were nev r able to resum the natural course of life There was always a steel door tor he fl hing umou s of where the mob would strike next and news of an th stabb ng to remind us of altered times

B t all th truggle wa not destructi e On 16 Apr l a child was born to Pom a fine healthy boy Yet the times had the r d e for no fest vity no c lebration g eeted him even though he was the first grands n Our nce n for sister Pom increased. She wa too v eak and the ch ld too young to permit us to ex cute ur plan of escap afely

About the middle of May the ri ts in Lahore broke out with the ame intens ty as they had during the Ma ch days For four consecuti e nights w had to abandon our home each n ght more convinc d tha before that it would be for th last time Now it was the fifth ight and as always we we e standing on the terrace wh e we ould ke p in touch with the other houses, and tak full ad antag of the view S ster Pom ti ed of stand i g was s tting on the st p with her baby only a month old, w th Ash k w sile tly moving to sister Pom now return ng to his other brother and si ters Soon h f ll asleep on the small bed which had bee move l there earlier for sister Pom s u e.

My sisters k pt wat h b eak ng the silence only to estimate the exact locati n of the various fires Some of them seem d no more than half a mile from our home The vile shrieks and

sounds to which we should by now have grown accustomed, though we had not, vibrated through the sultry night As always in the month of May, there was no noticeable movement of air, the days had been stifling the temperature running as high as 115 degrees Finally, once again clasping hands we slowly descended the stairs, brother Om and Father following

Within the four walls where once sobs and moans had given vent to the terror of women, we were now surrounded by the quietude of enervated women too spent, too resigned to cry out Never was the scene of our first night s exodus repeated Drill after drill had made these women trained and proficient

For a quick death each one of them carried poison firearm or razor-edged blade If anything remained to sustain them it was the value of honour and courage the principles of renuncia tion and suffering practised by untold centuries of Hindus

As I held Ashok, I thought of the day he had arrived then his near loss with meningitis how he had tugged at my mother s *sari* and crawled on the carpets Many a time I had scolded him for entering my room and tinkering with my electrical equip ment I had always been afraid in case I forgot to unplug all of it and Ashok unable to resist the urge to copy his brother, would try to make it hum

Being the youngest, he was pampered by everyone and almost nothing was denied him Whereas before he had been noisy and full of life, ever since the March days he had tried to make him self invisible, or so it seemed Now he lay still and he had even returned to sucking his thumb

Bombs exploded outside The mob sounded no farther away than the gate of Bishan Das s house and at any moment we expected to hear shooting break out which might deter their on rush for a time But fate was not to end our existence that night either and once again at dawn we passed through the steel door

Next day, Shekh Sahib came and earnestly told us that our house had barely escaped the mob If we would not relent in sending my sisters to his house we had better get them out of Lahore He said it enigmatically, as though he knew more than we did, and was aware of the mob s next move

His visit combined with the fresh assaults on Lahore s nce the co ced ng of Pakistan determined my father to send us away and f r once he did not ask for a ote or heed my sisters attempts to di uade him That day he would go to Uncle Daulat Ram and a k him t s nd h daughters away also My sisters pleaded with Mothe once he had left that they would be more apprehensi e away f om Lahore ot knowing what had happene l to her and Fathe But it seemed Mother and Father had reached thi de i ion t geth r and she was just as firm as he

All this time I d d not know that their decision affected me as well But whe my father eturned he said Uncle Daulat Ram wanted to send h so a ay a d they had determined that Pav a d I sh uld leave too My fath r emed taken up with the idea that he wanted eve y ne t leave but him but Mother stubbo nly persi te l that l e w uld h ar none of it and if Moth r r ma ned A hok must stay also Sister P m was to leave that night fo D hr Du and th rest f us were to b ard the train for Bomb y th next day eve though trains were spo ad cally st pped by the m b and th pass gers obbed a d lain

Despite the dire pred ctions of all those who learned that we were t cross th border by train ur j urney was uninterrupted by the Mu lim m b But th motional tate of us all made the t ip a ythi g b t peaceful An old woman near us kept up a ceasele s stream of v cti es and forebodings and the wailings a d out of the f ght ned nd lonely and bereaved only served to augment our own s nse of loss

All th ugh the j ur y the j u ney ac os the hot and dry pla ns back toward Bombay I kept thinking about Sohan who had al ay t eated me as though I were his brother equal to understand ng the hade of his op nions and moods I kept wishing that the *gh* boy wh had b ought me word of Sohan s d ath the ght of our d pa ture had been wrong But in that train reality was too much with me

'Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan'

THE drum rolled outside and the band tuned up to greet the eve of independence but the spirited music was flat to our ears For us, on that 15 August, Independence Day meant that we could never return to Lahore

We had spent two months in Bombay with my father s nephew, Cousin Anand There was almost nothing for us to do except remain in the house and since we had no idea how prolonged our stay would be, we could make no plans for the future In peaceful Bombay, business went on as usual but when conditions took a turn for the worse in West Punjab other relatives came to stay in the four room apartment until the number swelled to seventeen In spite of these cramped quarters where we had to sleep on the floor we were reasonably happy for regularly streams of letters arrived from Mother assuring us of the safety of those at home

In Lahore, she said, things had improved slightly since our departure in May, though the situation in West Punjab had progressively grown worse But now and again we would detect a note in her letters which revealed that their position was increasingly precarious It was only a matter of days she said in one of her later letters, before the massacres which were sweeping the countryside would reach Lahore, but they hoped to get out soon

Her last letter, written on the third of August left us with grave concern My father, as head of the department, was charged with dividing the assets between East and West Punjab This responsibility she thought, would delay him beyond the tenth of August the date by which all Hindu officers and the Hindu police had been told to be across the border

We knew this would delay them beyond the safety of the p esent lull e e though the b undary commi sion had not d awn the exact line of demarcation and many inhabitants belie ed tha Lahore l' might be included n India Whe her awa ded to P ki ta r Indi h we r the fate of Lahore s ould be the ame f r the M sl m would laun h another onslaught wh ch w uld pa all human co pt on Lured by the pros pe ot be oml g we l h o n gh on the Hindus were eje ted th M l m w uld exp s the r e ntment in a fren y of de tru ti n A th pa t th f t that middle-cla s Hindus and S kh ne l m t h p p rty v uld b used by the Mu l m Le gu l ade to g e dd d i en e to the anger of the mas s

Ou a xiety wa in ed when M th r w ote that Chachaji refu d t l e Lah a d that all my fath r attempts to dis uade h m w me t g w h buff He bel e ed that once the t te t P k t n w f m d no mal ond ti ns would re sume and all H nd would be bl to etu n t the r homes H had e t ely g ned h fide e du ing th two months s nce ou dep tur and a su ed h ms lf that he va ight after all t b l t g hat ult na ly H d and Mu lims would come to t rms Ch ch ji ha l n e y conte nce betrayed yet he co n l t bel n ty and to g e m redit to human natu e th t d ed

N a w at h apa m t on Ma ine Dri e on the Ar b a Sea le n d that Lah r w s ablaz and the fateful p edi t on ha l m t u We tr ed t call ou parents but the tel ph l ne had been e e d Ind ed the e as no commu ni at n b tw Ea t a d We t Punjab We tried t call at Amrit r th fi t city ac s the border in East Punjab to ch ck f r th a ival bu found that th c rcu ts were over loaded ith all booked day befor

N ght afte night w h d sat up w t ng for the telephone to ring or the tel g aph me s nger to knock In a fitful doze I dr amed I w s ba k n Laho e nd e ap ng through th steel door only to ea h anothe wall Th s wait ng in mournful silen e with mind fill d with happy a d trag c mem ries seemed

more painful than any physical torture we might have experienced at the hands of the Muslims

The glorious music of the triumphant band blared on in martial concert, lifting emotions until people shouted jubilantly and danced to its rhythm while the Army marched with its guns on shoulder and shoes polished An hour away was independence for the country, but it seemed a hollow celebration We had seen too much of freedom in Lahore the freedom to loot and to kill

The only comfort I could derive from all this was that we still had hope, but I was soon melancholy again when I thought of how many hundreds of thousands were meeting the day without hope and the words of my father flashed through my mind What will matter in these times is not property but life

We gave no second thoughts to the house or the luxury of having separate rooms and beds to sleep in though I recalled with grief my loss of friendship with Sohan and Mr Khanna

But to this melancholy mood was added anger when I thought about the recent utterances of Gandhiji He was asking Hindus and Sikhs to remain where they were and be strong and strength to him meant resistance to conversion unto death stoicism and non violence even as you saw your daughters abducted your wife murdered He was demanding spiritual strength from people tortured beyond endurance

I knew my repudiation of Gandhi s ideals was a rejection of those I too had held and had I not been so overwhelmed by personal emotion I might have reproached myself Now I felt a slight exhilaration return as I thought that the long cries for action by the suffering non Muslims in West Punjab had finally been heeded It took five months of systematic annihilation in West Punjab before the Hindus and Sikhs abandoned their policy of non violence and fought back By the end of July enough refugees had begun drifting in to dramatize vividly the reports which had preceded them Their harrowing tales and their mere presence moved their previously passive Sikh and Hindu brothers to ruthless retaliation Eager for revenge I was happy to read in the papers that Hindus and Sikhs with the M

had started taking p ide in the number each personally had slain If I had been lucky enough to kill two or three Muslims I too would ha e boaste l with pride of the ac omplishment Ga dh ji s ideals were lated

The fifteenth of August came and went Now the new India was a day old and still there as no word f om our pa ents Then th thick heavy s lenc was p er ed with the sharp ring ng of the teleph ne It wa o r pa ent They with Om and Ashok had cr s ed the bo der but had not been able to persuade Cha chaji to lea e Lah re They had b rely es aped and told us that fe if any had be n able to g t away from the city after the twelfth of August though many had t ied and lost their lives They had sp nt the la t th night in Amritsa as had ma y other th usa d of destitute refug es and they asked us to come to Delhi to meet them as soon a possible

E er sin e I ha l tarted atten li g R S S S and had come to k ow Sohan I had begu to do bt whether H ndu and Mus l ms could e li e togethe am ably as they had in times past The w s always a p ssibil ty that anothe man like Jinnah would t rt out by mak ng h s cause one with Hi dus but would l t make a clean b eak f om them and using relig on a his b s w ld tart ag in the ircle of rel gious strife The wh l bloody tory would be ep ted once more and it seemed t m at th tim that the only way to a oid a ther tragedy w s neve to give Mu lims the chance to abuse leader ship

K now ng Soha b ave and v gor us ready t sacrifice his l fe in the name of the new H ndu I d a had mo ed me deeply and hi blunt as e tions that the w rk of Ga dhiji and other Congre s leade was do e h d not left me untouched During those f ur re tless days wh n we wa t d f the teleph ne to ring I had become increa ingly c inced by Sohan s logic I too could then have shout d Ind a for Hindus — *Hindi H du H dust*

Yet now that my fears about my parents h d be n a re ted I felt mo e sober thoughts etu ning epro ching me for my

change of heart On the one hand I felt that Hindus and Muslims could live side by side, and on the other that the only way the religious strife could resolve itself was by the formation of a state where Hindus, the majority ruled

Disturbed by these contradictory thoughts I finally went to sister Nimi who was an ardent supporter of Gandhi The words of Sohan came back to me that it was not the non violence of Gandhi but the decency of the British Government which respected his methods that had led to independence, and I won dered if she agreed with this

Her response was immediate British people decent? My foot! Was it their decency that made them imprison the leaders who protested against their enslavement? Was it their sense of decency that turned Muslims against Hindus? If Gandhiji had died fasting even Britishers with all their might could not have ruled India any longer They let him continue his hunger strike as long as they did simply because they did not realize its effectiveness They always kept a close eye on Gandhiji so that they might come to the rescue before anything happened to him

Granting that s so couldn t it be said that Gandhiji has done his work? He s too idealistic to face the Muslim threat You and I have seen their orgy in the name of religion

But you can t condemn all Muslims for the work of their leaders What would you have us do? Wipe out all Muslims? That would mean we Hindus would launch an orgy as bad as the Muslims

No but you could deny them a share in the Indian Govern ment Hindus have no voice in the Pakistan Government so why should the Muslims have any in India? You would also rule out the possibility of another leader like Jinnah

Just the opposite might happen sister Nimi replied You can t ever subjugate a race of people Eventually they would rebel and under a leader probably much more ruthless than Jinnah Besides, when you subjugate Muslims you are enslav ing some of your own kind No Gandhiji s work is far from done There are too many people like you who are beginning

SIXTEEN

Refugees

A WEEK or two after our parents call we returned from Bombay to Delhi The same atmosphere which had prevailed in Lahore during the March and May days seemed to have gripped Delhi too During our two-week stay there the city was convulsed with outrages patterned after the too-successful methods of West Punjab, and we were once again caught up in a climate of nervous tension and anxiety

While in Delhi we learned that all the Mehta and Mehra families had escaped from Lahore without casualty Even Chachaji, who had been the last to leave Lahore had miraculously reached Delhi We heard, however that our distant relatives in Sheikhupura district had not been so fortunate they had met death at the hands of the Muslims

Almost every one of those who escaped from Lahore came without their possessions, and those who had once enjoyed large homes now lived in one room We were staying with one of our uncles in Delhi, where thirty people were crammed into only four rooms

Meanwhile my father had been asked to proceed immediately to Simla the capital of East Punjab so our parents did not meet us at Delhi At last, when it was considered relatively safe, we left our uncle s house and went to Simla

Our parents had not been able to bring anything with them from Lahore and the small official house which was allotted to us stayed unfurnished for nearly three months The cold nights of this hill station forced us all to stay in, wrapped in our bed clothes for at the time we could not get fuel Even during the daytime, we scarcely left home for we had only summer clothes

My father was now posted as a director, and had taken over the whole Public Health Department in East Punjab He spent

some time in Simla grappling ith the dimensionless p oblems whi h had come nto bei g as more and more refugees po ired across the border in c nvoys miles long each bearing the marks of the tragedy in his family and without an *anna* or a promise of shelter ahead By December 1947 three months after the independ nce no less than four mill on people had been e acuat d f om what was nov Pakistan

A considerable part of Fath s work consequently was done in the plains where the refugee amps spread miles square The Hindu and S kh retal ation was st ll continuing w th great ferocity and o it wa t co s de ed saf f r my si ters to lea e Siml I wa allowed howev r to accompany my father a few times We tra elled with a police esco t and stopped at various ref gee camp wh re he mad d tailed inspections in order to pla further attacks on the p oblems of sanitati n and epid mic d ea s Day in and day out powd red m lk packaged foods and accin were flown o b ought to these camps All the serv ces co-op rated t me t this desperate problem of providing f r a d rehabilitat g these efug es

I r member my fi st mpre s on of a refugee camp It was a huge sprawling en mpment nea Ambala and we reached th e in th ea ly pa t of the fternoon Two of my father s as tant j ned us the e and we began the t ur Wh le my father on e d with th in pectors and other health officers, I se ed the app alling u rou ding if there was ever a pathet c s ght I imagi d th was t

Th foul smell of hum n filth and the odour of th sick and dy ng we o powe i g Flies droned and crawl d child en begg d fo fo d a d mothe t ed to distract them from their hu ger Medical attendant followed the flies and jabbed needles int the arms of chil l en too weary to wince or c y then inocu lated women and m n Th men v ho had one work d their own land ploughed and s wed thr gh long days a d provi oned th r fam l for longer wi t s now sat idle so apa th tic that we stumbl d across them and still they did not move

Fverywh e o e tur ed there were sto ies of i nbelievable atroc ti s E en if margin we allowed for refugees exaggera

ting their own misfortunes their treatment had been hideous Some talked more readily than others but many of them were too dazed to speak As one of the inspectors was inoculating we approached him My father, pressing my hand said quietly that the man being inoculated had no hands

As the inspector rapidly moved away to another refugee, I stood by the man and tried to speak to him From his first few softly spoken words, I gathered that he was a Sikh and like all Sikhs had been marked by his long hair and beard as sure prey for the Muslims He asked Where did it happen to you? – my blindness had often been mistaken by the refugees as one more inhuman act of the Muslims

We lived in Lahore I answered but it wasn t the Muslims There was a long pause Your hands – how did that happen?

In a *gurudwara* We expected them We had been sleeping there for four nights The fifth night they came They told us to come out and they wouldn t make trouble Become Muslims, they said and return to your homes But we would never change our faith

I had heard of some Hindu villages where the villagers had embraced Islam Even their daughters had been forcibly married to Muslim hooligans But most never considered changing their faith, even though it meant losing all their possessions and seeing their families tortured and slain

They besieged the *gurudwara* for two nights and a day Our ammunition ran out the first night Our supplies were gone, too

From there the story was no different from that of a hundred other villages where the temple had been forced by the mob The men had begun killing their own women to save them from torture and rape

This Sikh was able to kill his daughter but had hesitated a moment and was overpowered before he could put his wife to death He resisted and thought he had killed one Muslim before they hacked off his hands then slashed his ears They would have tortured him to death but through some impossible

strength born of rage he broke from their hands to follow the men who were carrying his wife In the thick of the mob he had lost them but escap d himself He had hidden for a week without food until a lorry of Sikh police had carried him to the con oy

But all refugees were ot o stunned as this Sikh Their mi ery had made them ow to avenge the deaths of their loved ones Whenever you talked to them about non violence and Gandhi their response was imm d ate

Gandhiji did not hi daughter raped

Gandh ji didn t l e his vife

Some went even further accusing him of cowardice and saying that he wa afraid to come to Punjab But only one p ayer me ti g with Gandhiji i the Delhi refugee camps was enough to con nc o e that he suffered even more than tho e who h d xp ienced violence and blood hed first hand and that his w ld was above cowa dice or consideration of self

The h avy ow had not yet begun to fall to fill the streets and shut ea h fam ly up aro d the h a th for the long Simla w t By now i early D ember we began to ha e a small fi e si e th firepla e provided our ole warmth against the fro ts and w ds that chilled the hill station We clustered around it o comf table cha rs which the government finally pro ided Moth knitted my sisters ead e n Ashok was busy rattl ng his cray ns a l ttle as he orked er a colour book I alo was doi g noth g

Thi routin of idl ness had never preyed so hea ly on my mind as it did ow Before n Pindi there had been spacious c mpounds the fri ndship of Sa a ch ck n a d fish to distract me from the cont nuous reminder that I was doing noth ng Then too in Pindi the th ught that one day I would return to s hool perhap go t Ame ca with all our fam ly packed into a lorry had been the e to sustain me in my idle moments Now even that w s in the pa t

In less than three years the gov r ment s plan f compulsory retirement at fifty five would force my father to give up his job,

our government home and all the privileges of service As we had lost all our property and belongings in Lahore every bit of his present salary had to be saved to make provision for this retirement We no longer spoke of America

While in Pindi and Lahore, at least a music teacher had been engaged to take up some slack in the time here in Simla even that could not be done All my musical instruments *tabla tambura sitar* and harmonium had been left behind and no teacher here could add to my progress The few Braille books I had started collecting in Lahore on my return to school had been lost to Pakistan also Even my electric transformers and carpentry tools were gone

Day after day for two months I passed the time in this state of inaction, each day contributing to the depression of the next I longed for something anything to do but in this forsaken hill station there was no distraction I was now approaching my fourteenth birthday Brother Om at the age of fourteen had started attending college I had had, altogether three years of school a little over two and a half of which had been spent in Bombay when I was very young

One day I had asked sister Nimi if she might not read to me from a book as Mr Khanna had suggested but she did all her reading in English, and being educated in a convent had not even learned to read Hindi This from the very outset barred me from any pleasure I might have derived from reading for my English vocabulary was comparable to that of a nine year-old Indian child attending school

There was as yet no standard Hindi Braille, and everything for the use of the blind was written in English I had written to the National Institute for the Blind in England for some books so that I could start studying English on my own but they had not yet arrived Besides I had not been able to learn grade two Braille in which most good writing was transcribed

Even though I said nothing about my state of mind to my parents it was too obvious to go unnoticed They saw me sitting continually in one chair at the end of the semi-circle, occasionally interrupted by Ashok to help him with his Meccano set, to

tighten a screw or bend a strip for his home made windmill But they like myself refrained from discussing what seemed hopeless

One evening while we sat as usual in the drawing room Father who had been away in the plains returned unexpectedly with velcome ews f r me Through Lady Mountbatten (with whom he was looking after the refugee camps and convoys) he had come to know Sir Clutha Mackenzie a totally blind Eng lishman who was dire ting St Dunstan s Hostel for the war blinded in Dehra Dun He vas the first highly educated blind person that my father had ever met and he had been much im pressed by his learning and abilitie

Father had talked to him about me and asked if I might be admitted to St Dunstan as that was considered the best train i g centre for the blind in India Sir Clutha Mackenzie consid ered this most improbable as no civilian had ever been admitted to thi hostel for the war blinded

My fathe had i sisted upon my at least meeti g him if for no oth r easo than that h would be an inspiration So when he retu ned to the plain I a companied h m and was intro duced t S Clutha While I could not u derstand all he said in E gli h I did con ers w th h m my father prompting Though I t ld very little of my tate f mind it seemed to me he compre he ded amazi gly well how I felt He promised to take up my case with th go ernme t

Withi a week t m I wa t ld that a p c al exception had been made and I could atte d mo ning lasses in Braille and typi g at St Dunstan s I had not been s parated f om my family i ce the tim I had spe t i Bombay and my mother remarked that I s emed too happy to leave them

St Du stan s was so much of a contrast from Dadar and Emerson schools that at first I felt completely lost It was a beau t ful place whi h had one been a es dence for the bodyguard force of the Engl h go rnor general a d l ke mo t army en campments was located at the out kirts f th city Since those who lo e the r sight lat in life have a d ffi ult time with mo bility long wires were st et hed ac o s the sp awling campus

from barracks to barracks, the buildings that were now dormitories and classrooms

The classroom atmosphere was as wholesome as that of the huge compound with its scores of lichee trees There were no boys standing at the door of a class swinging a fan or instructors with wet canes I came in contact with only two teachers Mr Cameron, the typing instructor and Mr Advani who taught Braille both of whom were blind

I remember the first day I walked into typing class Mr Cameron greeted me He was an Anglo Saxon and spoke with a strong Scottish accent His handshake was nervous but hearty He introduced me to the only other student then in the classroom I remember my shock at putting my hand forward and meeting a steel hook The man had lost both his arms at the elbows He used this steel hook to type and I believe his speed was twenty or twenty five words a minute Later on as I grew to know him better, I often unscrewed his steel hook to insert other instruments, such as a knife or fork

There was an unexpected advantage in being taught by Mr Cameron He could only speak English and since I spent one hour with him alone he had ample time to tutor me in that language as well as teach me typing Mr Advani taught me grade two Braille, the more complex Braille which includes contractions and abbreviations I became quite adept and was even chosen as one of the students to read when Lady Mountbatten visited the school

My stay in Dehra Dun was not only fruitful but happy I was allowed to take out Braille books and magazines from their small library and for the first time I was able to do some reading While I missed my family I did value my independence and my serious studies which for the first time could be considered as academic progress

I had almost no friends there, for all the students were beyond my age full grown men the majority of whom had been recently blinded in the Second World War They were not well adjusted to their blindness and it was considered best that I come in close contact with them as little as possible Indeed, if it

not been for Kakaji and sister Pom who lived in Dehra Dun, or the B aille books whi h occupied my time I would have been quite homesick

I stayed at St Dunstan s Hostel only eight months for Captain Mortimer v ho had taken command from Sir Clutha Mac kenzie wrote to my father in September 1948 telling h m that he felt I had learned all St Dunstan s had to offer and that I should now pursue the po sibility of higher edu ation. He added that I had done well on occasion substituting for the Braille master but that how ver much they welcomed me the company of resentful and discou aged se icemen was not good for an imp essionable young boy He felt that I who did not regard my blindne s as a vi itat on of the gods was ready for the next step Sin e India could off r me nothing more in the way of education ne t step meant the West – a step in a sense made easier for me by the inspiring examples of Mr Cameron and Sir Clutha Ma kenzie

On a Sunday morning in the month of October 1948 my father and I l ft ou c ttage n Simla for Cla ke s Hotel We had started out a ly so that we might take a leisurely walk and so that I might have ampl time to relax from my excitement

On our way we talked about the fo thcoming interview with M Baldwi a rep esentat ve of a large American corpo at on

Am ricans generally a e ea y go ng people They re under standing and en if you make a mi take it won t matter Ju t *don t be nerv us*

Yet I was ner ous All n ght I had to sed in my bed thinking about the ext day with fear and ex itemen So much depen ded n thi int vi w fo M Baldwin had promis d to try to make som arra gement th ough his company f r financial assi tance as h corporation was conside ing awa ding scholar sh ps to Ind an students in Amer ca in recognit on of its ex pand ng busine in new India

Suppose my fathe continued suppo e Mr Baldwin is not impressed It doe n t matter *Remember I am always there.* We ll manage somehow

I don t want it to be that way, I answered him 'You have too many responsibilities

But if my children aren t my responsibility, what is? From the very day you lost your sight I set my heart on giving you as good an education, or a better one, as the rest of my children You have waited a long time

Yes but you had no idea about Pakistan and all its consequences

Remember your grandfather s circumstances No man in his position could have dreamed of sending his children to England Yet he did The sacrifices I made to send you children to school are nothing compared to his I tell you son, education is in our blood

That phrase from his diary I would sell my soul to give Ved an education, came back to me and I was moved to tears

We finally reached Clarke s Hotel and my father sent his card up to Mr Baldwin s room before we climbed the stairs ourselves

'Is this the young fellow, Mr Baldwin began, taking my hand, that you talked about, Doctor?

This is he, sir

Come on, take a seat, son and he led me to a chair

I had not met many Americans for most of my father s friends before independence had been British The mere sound of a British accent, and English spoken in that crisp firm way had delighted me

Mr Baldwin, however spoke fast less deliberately and with a nasal twang to his voice At first I was taken aback for I could not understand what he was saying but his friendliness put me at ease After chatting with my father for a while, he came to me and stood behind my chair

I understand you want to go to America

I nodded

You know that s a long way from your home

He asked me to sketch what education I had received India I was ashamed to tell him that altogether my studies

occupied le s than four years. Hearing my answers he was sil nt and I sen ed his disappointment

You have a *Re der s D gest* there he finally began Would you r ad an arti le for me? His easy going manner had become br sk and bu ines like He sea ched through his desk and found a print d opy f th ame month

I had rehear ed one arti le and had lea ned the meaning of the vord h p ng that he would ask me to ead an article of my choi e But to mv d may and great nervousn ss he said

Th r s a goo l a i le her about Amer can youth and the effect of om c book I th nk you ll find that interesting Can you find it her r

W th my u t ady fing rs I ran through the contents once without u s an l th r again th s t me more slowly but I could ha dly ec gnize th e ds b neath my fingers At last I f und it All th s t m he had ema ned behind the chair and I felt ry uneasy thi king h mu t be wat hing my trembling finger A I turned to th r a t l I pr ss l my fingers down on th d ts try g t st ady them and held my arms close to my s d At the v v fi st nten I tumbled but neither my fa h r to h ame o my r ue Wh n I came to words l ke manit t d ju n l l l nqu ncy I ould hardly pro n un e them let al ne un l rstand their meaning Rather than reading flu n lv w h n ler tand ng I isolated words from their s nt n pay ng n h d t pu tuation He topped me at one pl a d a k d if I u der tood what a part ular sentence meant I did not

Then a typ r wa brought in and he s arted d ctati g t m f om the am a ti le If I uld only steady my fingers, I thought I typed the fir t s t nc u ing the th rd row instead of th middle on a th h me row I never did get my bearings aft that I typed a d b k pa ed th n typed over ag in By the nd f f ty fi e m nutes the interview was over and I knew I had failed m ably

My h ad w hea y from th sl pless n ght before, and I did n t f llow all the ex hange between my father and Mr

Baldwin, but I did understand one sentence which dashed all my hopes and plunged me into despair

I want to be frank, Doctor I think this boy should stay here.'

Then he went on to say that my language handicap and the very mediocre quality of my educational foundation would stand me in poor stead when I competed with students who had been at school since the age of six

But I ll write to a friend in my company back home acquaint him with your unusual circumstances and try to find out what can be done

With this sentence, which was added more as a courtesy than a guarantee that some future arrangements would be made, my father and I left

As we descended the stairs, I experienced a keen sense of frustration Students who had been in school since they were six years old, he had said They would be the ones I would compete against What was my education as compared with theirs? I knew almost nothing about arithmetic My English though considerably improved during my stay at St Dunstan s was poor My experience in Braille reading was slight All the talk ing of Mr Khanna about the vagueness of my ambitions for education had not disconcerted me as much as this one inter view

'Success my father was saying depends on determination and perseverance and disappointments should strengthen rather than shake them I will stand behind you and you will go to England or America even if you have no financial assistance or as far as that goes, no admission Don t forget, child that I myself went to England without promise of admission Once you are there, they won t send you back

His words were not without effect His voice betrayed no sign of disappointment, and he spoke as confidently as he always had As I walked beside him holding his large surgeon s hand, I revived a bit There was something contagious about his confidence, and in spite of all my reservations about my own

SEVENTEEN

'We all agree . .'

We both agree that it would be a mistake to bring your son over to England during the most formative years of his life We have had two Indian students at our secondary school for blind boys in Worcester and both of them on their return have found themselves ill adjusted to Indian life, and out of touch with the interests of their people

bringing these boys to England appears not altogether to be doing them a kindness

it is essential that he should not be too early subjected to Western influence

These were answers given by education authorities in Europe and the United States to letters seeking my admission to a school of higher education They were echoed with monotonous exactitude until one might have thought they were written with one pen

There was yet another question they asked for which neither my father nor I had an answer What does he want to do with his education, does he want to specialize in anything? The only reply approaching a satisfactory answer that we could give them was perhaps learning Western music Ever since I had left Dadar I had been tutored in Indian music in which direction I had shown considerable talent Since my sisters music teacher in Lahore Master Kohli was, although blind one of the most successful musicians in Punjab it was thought this would be a good means of livelihood for me

This possibility had gained weight with my father when he noticed that songs coloured with Western touches which were composed for the film industry were received with enthusiastic applause by Indian audiences He thought I might well be a pioneer in improving Indian music which is almost

melody by bringing about a fusion of Eastern melody and We te n ha m y

I had reservations about pursuing this career I knew nothing about Western music and I might not be at all talented by We te n standards So I was honest in admitting to the Western authorities that I had not the sl ghtest notion as to what type of educat on I wanted o for wh t purpose Needless to say this did not imp e my chan es of enlisting their support I longed f a good sol d academic education qual to the one my sisters and b other were cei ing If I did not know what I should do with it it wa simply because I was young and because very few blind people in India had e er pos es ed it

When I had fi t decid d to sta t seeking admission to one of the in t tutions n th West the first practical hurdle was where to begi wh m to app ch Pe k ns was the only inst tution of whi h I had p e iou ly hea d so my first letter was w itten to them Ne t I look d th ugh the fly lea e of my B a lle books fo addr es of publ hers f I had been told at St Dunstan s that these inst tutio s n t only published but took an active p rt in prom ting education for the blind

So I w te t th National Institute for the Blind i London a d the Ame i an Printing Hou e in Louisville Kentucky It wa to these lett rs that I received answers like those quoted abo e The eaft y attempt to d uade them only increased th ir co ict on that I h uld ot lea e India

I sea ched fe er hly for mo e add e ses in my Braille books a d maga ine I f u d only two others one in Edinburgh a d one i Pa is The one in Edinbu gh tu ned out to be an asylum and referred me back to the Nati nal In titute In my letter to Pa is I said th t my last g desi e was to study in France th ugh I kn w not a w rd of that language which they were q ick t po t out So I reached a dead end until another idea occu d to me

I w ote to th Amer can P ting House for the Bl d asking them to send me a l t f the l te tur publi hed so that I m gh select some mo e magazines to ead Thi list I knew would include the addresses of various schools in the United States

ch had their Braille newspapers published at the Printing
ise On its arrival, indiscriminately I hammered out letters to
ost every place listed, claiming that their school alone
ild meet my need Within two months I had written to
ty people and awaited expectantly their answers I made the
tman promise to deliver our mail first and each time I would
e the letters to sister Nimi with my hands trembling She
ild open and read them to herself quickly and the silence
ch followed made me understand that one more unfavour
e reply had come At first she tried to console me by saying
t all was not over yet but by and by she gave up and began
ry, and I would be the one to keep a brave face in her pres-
e, only to return to my room and break down

his universal opinion of the authorities should have con
ed anyone but it did not change our course much Even if
ere too subjective too consumed by my own ambition and
ld not appreciate their argument my father, objective as he
should have encouraged me to abandon for the present my
ire to go But he did the opposite He himself wrote to many
horities entreating them to reconsider

tried to occupy the empty, anxious days and in some measure
ck my growing disappointment by reading whatever Braille
terial I could get my hands on, from St Dunstan s or England
America If my correspondence was indiscriminate my read
was no better directed I read religious magazines like the
ille Baptist and the *Discovery* various digests and some
ion Thus I had the consolation of not resuming my fireside
t at the end of the semi-circle with empty hands

hree months of uninterrupted waiting and disappointment
ned finally approaching an end for my addresses were being
austed About then, Cousin Anand under whose protection
had spent the months after leaving Lahore visited us

hough he was my father s nephew, to us he had been like
rother My father had played an important role in helping
n receive his education He had just returned from America
l I felt a keen sense of satisfaction in talking to someone who
l recently been to a place where I so longed to go It

same type of satisfaction sweet melan holy which I used to experience sitting by the rad o listening to (and not al ays understanding) a broadcast in English from the B B C Australia or India

One day the topic of my going to America came up and my father asked him his opinion

You want my honest opinion? I e began

Yes

I don t think he ought to go Supposing he did get all the education he wants What w ll he do with it? You know your self how ma y young people there are in this country today with B A s and M A s wl o can t get a job And they can see

The l ng ab ence f om his own people at this age would be most harmful Their world their way of life is very different Confli t g cultural backgrounds will make him a misfit He will belong n ither here nor the e I think he would be happ er if he stayed i India got what l ttle education he could and took up music more s iously He will be more than self s pporting de ive sat faction from his music and be close to all of u so that w can g ve him help when he needs it

My heart sank I knew how mu h my father r spected Cousin Anand s op ion What he said seemed so sensible and true All the letters agreed He had just return d from America and even isited th Amer can Printing House I knew his opinion was held by almo t all ou relati es but they were not as cand d, knowi g my wilfulness a d my father s determ nat on All the wo ker in the field of education fo the blind gave the same a guments

Y t there was on thing He spoke of happiness At night when I lay in bed I had often w ndered about it Could I ever be happy just teach ng music like Panditji? Could I bear to aband n for e er my de ir to se k further learning? Perhaps if I had not been b ought up in a family where everyone talked of nothing but ed ation making me feel always apart from them a d perh p if there had been no talk of going West for me I would p bably ha e been happy bei g a music teacher like Master Kohli

As I had expected, the next day my father opened the subject with me when we were alone

You know, he said, what little money I ve saved for you can be used any way you wish You could continue to study Indian music and still have enough left over perhaps to open a small shop There is no doubt in my mind that this way you will be self supporting and independent

Besides, as Cousin Anand says, you would be close to all of us Leaving home, son, is no easy matter I did it in my younger days, and it was hard enough In your case it would be even harder

'Going West is, at best, a most hazardous undertaking We do not know how your small education compares with that of other boys there You may have to start from the fifth or sixth grade, and the longest I could support you would be three to four years, perhaps another year if we borrowed money But you wouldn t have even finished high school by then Mean while all the money would be gone and you would not be able to pursue your Indian music Nor would I have anything left for you to open a shop If Pakistan hadn t happened I could have given you as much education as you might have wished but now it s quite different. Beyond anything else, there can be nothing more miserable than to be a misfit in your own home and country

I remembered the refugee camps The image of the hand less refugee with his ear slashed passed across my mind So many had lost so much! What was my ambition compared to the land and lives sacrificed to the birth of Pakistan?

I can reconcile myself, I said swallowing hard, to any thing

Father put his hand on my shoulder Something may work out but right now it looks pretty hopeless he said

Can I still go on writing to foreign schools, just on the chance of some encouragement? I asked

Of course, he said

I promise, Daddyji, I said, I will try to learn to be happy here.

'Yes'

It was s en in the morning and I was a akened by brother Om who as leaning o e my bed looking through the frosty wind w Soon my ste joined h m in sear hing the sky for the balloon whi h w uld ndic te safe kati g

I s ppose t didn t freeze last night Umi said in a disap po ted v ce

Th e! b ther Om houted and there we e exclamation of plea u e a they caught sight of the s gnal

They l ft mv m the pa tit oned-off end of our sun porch. B the Om ould n t fi d his skates so I got up to help him. The hou e s bitt ly c ld and som icy air came in th ough cr ck arou d th indow At last all pa aphern lia were collect d and ev yo dressed in h a y coats and left the house

Alm t e y day v the weather v as clear a d cold enough t f eez the e d my sist a d broth r Om spent three hou s in the m rn g th ee in the e ening ice skating I alon c ld n t t k pa t n th s t eat of th Simla hill stat n At first th y t ok m t th ink and I stood t the edge li ten ng to the bla g mu ic and shout of the skaters But I had put a stop th t I pref r d tay ng hom to st ndi g alone at the edge with ow a d th s m ne sk ting up to talk to me

I tood fo a wh le now h g at th op n doo l ten t the fade s they hu ri d up th h ll toward the ic skati g i k F ally I hut the door and etu ned t bed – the ly pl c whe e I c uld ke p wa m – but I could not go to sle again W th e yone go e a d Mother and Ashok not o se seemed d eary indeed

to p ck p my Braille book to read b t my fing w th c ld a d I g e up F alm t two hours I g what school t w te ext.

I had missed several schools on the list, most of them in the southern part of the United States As I had not even heard the names of the states they were located in I felt no particular desire to go there I wanted to go to Boston New York Chicago or San Francisco For me, that was the United States Neverthe less I decided to try them all

I wrote a letter to Arkansas School for the Blind, presenting my meagre qualifications as impressively as I could

Simla
31st January 1949

To
The Manager
Arkansas School for the Blind
Little Rock
Ark

Dear Sir,

Unfortunately I am a Blind boy of nearly 15 years of age. I beg to state that I would like to come over to America for my further studies, I know the following subjects
English
Mathematics
I can read Braille and can write Braille and I know sighted Typing with touch system I know contraction and abrivations I have colified from the following Instituation –
1 Dadar Blind School fr the Blind
2 Emerson Instituation for the Blind
Lahore Pakistan
3 St Dunstan s for the War Blinded Dehra dun
India

I have been studying in Dadar Blind School Bombay for nearly four years I learnt Braille reading and Writing and English I was sent there by my father when I was only five and a half I got Blind when I was Four Years old I lost eyesight with Manigitis I studied in Emerson Instituation For the Blind Lahore for one year where XXI learnt only AXXMathematics And little bit of my Country Language Then I was sent over to St Dunstan s for the War Blinded As this Instituation was only ment for War Blind Soldiers then even as I was Civilian I had to come across many difficulties before I cou get myself admitted in St Dunstan s I was taken there as

ord nary case. I stayed there f only one year but I must CX confess th t I m d ery good p gres in St Dun tan s I st yed in St. D nstan s Ho t l f r ight mo th and r st w th my relation I am herewith encl g a opy of C rtifi ate fr m St Dun tan s from \ F h I th k th t you will be able to judge th t what is my pos tion t pre ent St D t n is the b gg t I t tuati n go ng I d a And there t no m re scope in I d a fo my studies as I have gain d from St Dun t s wh t they c ld t ach me Howe r I h ll f el obl ed if y u could d me y u Appli ation Fo m & P ticula s Anyhow I would l k t po ses y r fo m & Pa t cul s e en if you do not thi k o f h que t r s th t with whi h yo wo ld l k t kn w som f m t o A th m tter has b n al ady been ex tr m ly d l y d I w n t l k th m tt r to b more del yed I am ery u e that yo w ll h lp me n th s matt r I am typ g th letter my lf Th typ ng a d B lle gr z s tau ht m in st Dun ta s My F th t mind pe d ng a y thing as far I can be admitted in yo S hool I w ld l k t c mpleteX y ur full co s I am f er w th e l g P tur f m I hope yo will app eci te it. Do y h ty E ami t n?

I do h pe to get a ply n affirmative

An ea ly eply equest d.

Thank g you

Sou s f ithfully
S/O Dr A R M h
Deputy D e t f Health serv es,
Erneston (Upper Fl t),
S ml East
Ea t Pu j b
(I d)

I wrot th lette w th no expectation that this school would r spond mor favourably than any other Then in the last week f F bruary I ec i d a letter fr m them and as usual took t to i ter Nimi to read

February 16, 19

Mr V P M hta
c/o Dr A R M hta
Deputy D rect r of Health Serv es
E est n
S mla—E
East Punjab, India

Dear Mr Mehta

I have your letter of January 31 in which you state you would like to attend the Arkansas School for the Blind

In reply I will say that we shall be happy to have you if details can be arranged By this I mean, entrance into the United States, which I presume can be arranged on a student basis financial details length of time you will want to stay course or courses you will want to pursue and perhaps other details

The usual fee charged for out of state pupils is $600 00 per school year of nine months I am not sure that $600 00 would be the fee charged you but certainly no more than that

We offer an academic course which prepares you for University entrance This consists of the usual courses offered in most American public schools In addition we offer broad courses in music, many vocations and athletics

I am not enclosing an application form but will send one later if you are still interested We are sending you a Braille copy of the Arkansas Braille News so that you may read for yourself something of our educational programme here.

May we hear from you again if you are still interested in our school

Sincerely yours
J M Woolly Superintendent

JMW/lh

I was ecstatic I could scarcely believe sister Nimi s voice *They would be happy to have me*

She read it fast and then re read it There was no doubt of its contents Had it not been that every letter before this had refused me perhaps I would have run to my mother and cried jubilantly that finally I was going to America and asked her blessings But disappointment after disappointment had made me wary

Tell me something about the school she said

I don t know anything about it There was a pause a pause long enough to sober me

I think you better keep this letter and show it only to Dad dyji she said in an expressionless voice

So it was that in the evening before handing the letter to my father, I told him, I know absolutely nothing about the

s hool Heretofo e I had not taken any letter to him that
not wr tte by a great and famous school like Perkins or W
ce ter College or a printing house like the National Instit
All my other co re pondence with less known schools I
considered too unimportant to trouble him with The cont
of those letters whi h indeed va ied little from one to the n
remain d between sist r Nimi and mys lf

That s encourag ng all r ght he began He said it v
perfect composure with no sign f any particular feelings

I sen d the same h sitation that I had imagined he wo
feel at ending me to a chool ten thousand miles away wh
for all v e knew might be no mo e than two lassrooms

It could you know he said be a school for Negroes A
way I hall follow this lead th ough and w ite to Mr Wo
but I v a n you in ad ance not to ba k too much on this

Fo three more weeks a childish but quiet hope lingered
and I fa ci d ometime that mayb all wa not over As M
came a d pa ed h w v and then April I re olved to fo
about i completely f r o wo d had come from Mr Wo
no ind ed had the *A ka B lle News* a ived

Then finally l te April I re ei ed the *B aille New*
sta t d ad g t m a ho than with a y great exp
ti n b t s I ad n and l a d of their social adjustr
progran me wh h made blind people independent able t
about the t ts th msel es and read someth ng about
curr cul m my h pe wa a u ed though it wa a caut
hope fc I d d n t wish to be disappointed agai I waited
somev hat expectant mood until the middle of May when
father brought home a lette info ming him that I was adm
at Arka sa School for the Blind

Are you go ng t end me the ?

That depends A yway th s letter can be u ed to get y
v sa and d lla Aft r you a e once in the United States if
find that Ark n as School is not uited to you you can al
change

I coul l t ll by his warm oice in spit of its caution t
might never really attend A ka sas School that he was h

for me Yet I felt a certain remorse, for I was going to America over the protest of all educational authorities, and against the opinion of all my relatives Suppose I had been wrong all this time and I were to fail, what then? Would I be able to bear the disappointment?

Such was the paradox of my reaction that I could see nothing but utter disaster ahead Perhaps I had waited so long it seemed an anti climax I wanted to discuss these anxieties with someone, someone who could understand all my contradictory sensations My father was the one person who had seen what my struggle meant to me, and when he told me that he had decided to take his accumulated leave before retirement and journey with me as far as Britain where he had some special business and perhaps as far as America if dollars could be obtained I felt very much relieved During the long sea voyage I would be able to discuss my fears with him and seek his guidance

With this security in mind I gave myself over to the enthusiastic preparations of the family Mother in particular The state of my clothes always her preoccupation and my annoyance, was now to be remedied, for she could at last convince me to adopt her standards All my sisters fell into a fever of knitting, as each was determined to present me with a sweater before I left sister Nimi wanted to take me to a record shop where I could choose music to remind me of home Ashok began to paint me a picture

The confusion and excitement left me in complete indecision as to where to begin But that problem was soon settled Preparation went on but I lay in bed suffering from the effects of half a dozen inoculations

One day when all the arrangements for my father and me to sail together for England had been made passports and visas secured Father returned home to say that his leave had been cancelled He had been promoted to Deputy Director General of Health Services in the Federal Government and had been asked to stay on for another year because he was indispensable

He said My first duty is to the nation then to my family He added in the same breath however It isn t all altruism If you are going to America I must continue earning If you can wait anoth r year I will take you Otherwise you will have to go alone It is all up to you

I will go alone now I returned and for all my eagerness the word alone jarred

My father took me at my word and since ship companies would not take me on by myself it took as much money as two sea passages to get m accommodations on the plane Through one of our relat s we hea d that a certain *pa dit* preferred the date of 14 August f my depa ture to any other and I being *indifferent agreed to go then although I was sorry to miss* on the day foll wi g the celebration of the second anniversary of India s independence.

O e impo tant d tail still emained t be settled The *pa d t s* decision wa g g t put me n the United States a month befo the openi g of my school What was I to do in that time? I wanted of course to see the country and meet people but goi g al e w th *meag e command of the Engli h language* and with t an troduction to a single American hardly seemed fea ible I began to f el f ight ned Father encouraged me

You can take a taxi to a small h tel in New York and you will meet lots of people right away because America is the frie dliest cou try in the world Even the taxi driver will become your friend

Despite the comforting words I knew he was really worried about me He wrote to ne of his old friends in the Un ted States who li ed in Ohio a k g if he knew any family in New Y k who ould tak me on as a paying guest The friend *re ponded by saying that a d tant relative of his in New York* had married a blind musician and that he had talked to the D Franco who w uld be glad to ha e m as a paying guest f r fifteen d llar a week Everything w s pe fect

My father s new j b required a mo e to New D lhi so the preparat n fo my d parture were interrupted while we packed our meagre belongings

I did not really feel I was going until three days before my flight when I had an interview with Pandit Nehru I was the first blind boy, it seemed who had ever left home to go to America Panditji therefore wanted to see me.

It was a hot and sultry August day in New Delhi and I felt uncomfortable in my new long pants and oversized coat My interview with Pandit Nehru was still a few minutes away and to pass the time we rode around the streets which were un usually quiet for India Father was driving the car and brother Om was sitting beside me opening and shutting the camera nervously I consulted my Braille watch again and again and the hands seemed to move at once too fast and too slow

I just hope, Om said when I take your picture with Pandit Nehru my hands are steady Otherwise it will come out blurred

We finally pulled up at the house of the Prime Minister of new free India I took my father s large hand and with brother Om carrying my typewriter, the *Arkansas Braille News* and his camera, we went in

Do you think Daddyji that Pandit Nehru will ever remem ber this visit?

I think he will he said but I wondered I was one fifteen year old boy out of a mass of three hundred and fifty million people to whom Panditji was both servant and lord

I hope he ll let me take pictures brother Om said

I opened my typewriter inserted a page and prepared to type and read Braille for Panditji to show him how well equip ped I was for going to America I thought about finding a pas sage in the Arkansas school paper which I knew especially well so that I would not falter when asked to read but that seemed dishonest

Just then Panditji walked in His step seemed to me gentle but firm just as I had imagined it Instantaneously all three of us stood up Father putting his arm round my waist said This is my blind son of whom I spoke to you Panditji, and after brother Om was presented we all sat down

Many a time I had heard the voice of the Prime M

3

AMERICA & LIBERATION

The Centre of the Universe

I WAS in the States In my imagination the land appeared as boundless as infinite as the oceans themselves and I longed for an impression, any impression, which in years to come I should be able to remember At home one could hardly go half a mile straight – there were curves turns alleys and back streets, and with the windows of the car rolled down you could hear the rhythmic tread of a horse harnessed to a *tonga* the occasional cracking of the whip of the *tonga* man as he tried to get his clients quickly to their destinations There were the tinkling bells of the bicycles and the curses of the ever present bicycle riders, who swore at the *tonga* men for blocking their way and the sepoys who cursed the bicycle men for cursing and blew whistles at the *tonga* men at every corner for going so fast Yes the streets I remembered in India were streets of unmistakable life with colourful sounds and profane language with bends and turns But the street that I was now riding on seemed to stretch before me wide and straight, and it was quiet The taxi driver had not yet used his horn and carried on no conversations with his fellow drivers In these streets I thought you could travel fast and you could always get places, and smoothly, too

On my right in the back seat sat Mrs DeFranco saying Oh you simply had a dreadful trip, poor boy What a terrible way to arrive

I didn t mind it, I said

'Oh, but just imagine having all the contents of your bags stolen

'I have two bags Mrs DeFranco I said, and one of them is still full

I know, but what a bad introduction to America She took both my hands in hers Then suddenly she broke into laughter

The centre of the universe, that s where I was, I thought, a centre of the universe without the circumference which I d always imagined the universe to have In India the universe was an endless circle and there it was a horizontal line I wanted to tell this to my two companions, but I did not know how to begin or how I could make it clear to them

In India my life had been routine, a circle of routine from which there was no escape It was like being on a merry go-round always in the midst of colourful things but nevertheless circumscribed by the monotonous movement of the merry go-round Being in America seemed like being on a swift train, and the life was full, indeed bursting with incidents like your bag being broken into

It was too early to tell which of the two I preferred

How was your plane ride otherwise, sir? asked the inquisitive driver

Yes Mrs DeFranco said tell us about it it must have been very exciting indeed

I wondered what I could tell them Could I tell them what my father had said just before I boarded the plane?

You will have to learn not to be so shy and sensitive he had said You ll have to become thick skinned

And my sister Umi had remarked in her usually light manner, Daddyji you certainly can t expect him to be thick skinned when he only weighs six and a half stone

What do you mean? I had retorted I m almost five foot five

Sister Nimi had tried to console me by saying He looks like a man What are you saying Umi?

Sitting in the airplane I had tried very hard to put this conversation from my mind I said to myself that I was a man After all, I was almost fifteen and a half and with my overcoat on, no one could tell how slender my boyish body was That was another of the phrases sister Umi used when she talked about me, and however much I tried to console myself still the phrase had caught like a thorn in my mind That first night on the plane I slept a little while only to dream of a full sized

mirror For the first time I was see ng my reflection in the mir ror and I was beating it saying I am a man not a boy a ma

I jolted awake b eathing hard I supposed it was morni g alth gh inside the plane it was h r d to tell I d never been closeted lik that befo e a d the enses of sound smell and e en to h w re dull d by the ce sant roar of the machi e so that to a bli d ma ight a d day m rged into one I surmised it was m n ng because sh rtly the air h t ss gently tapped my shoulder a d sa d S car fo ome breakfast now?

My first in lination as to say ye because my stomach did feel empty b t in a moment I remembered that my father wasn t there and how vould I eat b eakfast? All my life I d eaten with my hands A poon was th only imp lement I had e er used, and that ery arely A week before lea i g home my father had tried to gi e me qu ck l so s n at ng with a knife an l fo k, but I felt l msy with them a I would have trying to read Braill w th gl es on The ffo t quired to cut the meat from th bo e f a lamb ch p fru trat g and t rifying for me

N t yet I said to the ho tess but I should like s me orange ju e

That mo g I felt mo e kee ly than ever the need of that support I h d left behind me I had postponed lea n ng to eat with a knif d fo k the hope th t I would learn it from my father n the way Then my father had not been able to come with me

Are y u n a diet? the h te asked me o ce

No I said I am just trying to follow Ga dhiji

Ah he said but he fa ted for twenty-one days and I unde stand he didn t even d ink ora ge juice

I too m y have t I s d a d although I said th s w h a fo ced m le I took my word more seriously than did the ironic host s

Pl ase don t go on a hunger strike s r she said against our ai l n

It s not the a li e I sa d b t g my tongue but there are some religious reasons And by this statement I knew I had

raised myself in her estimation for when we stopped in Brussels she had special flasks of orange juice ordered for me, and I had an ample supply to last me across the Atlantic

More than once I wished that Mother had let me carry the chocolates in my handbag rather than stuffing them into a laundry bag along with socks and underwear and then sewing it to my overcoat You can carry more with you like this she said for they won t weigh your overcoat

Often I was on the verge of asking the hostess to bring me my overcoat, but the fear of being shamed because of the laundry bag kept my mouth shut and my stomach empty I tried to minimize the sensation of hunger as much as possible by blowing up my stomach with frequent glasses of orange juice The more I thought about the predicament of the knife and fork which the sensation of hunger never let me forget and the more I reflected upon my puny size the more gloomy I became I despaired at how long I could keep up the pretence and my pride

I was about to phrase a sentence including the words pretence and pride describing my trip for the benefit of my two companions in the taxi when Mrs DeFranco gently pressed my hand and said Poor boy, you still have difficulty with the language, don t you?

Yes it is a language difficulty I said belatedly

The driver remarked, Sure enough I have difficulty speaking English I could never learn to speak Hindu

Hindi, you mean, I corrected

You see?' he said with another jolly laugh Mrs DeFranco and I joined him, and laughing we turned on to Broadway

Ved we ll soon be home, Mrs Defranco told me and then you and my husband can have great fun together I know you will have a lot in common He was blind and I was blind and she thought therefore, that we would of course enjoy one another s company

Here we are the driver said, coming to a stop and I hastily pulled out the two dollars an American friend of my mother had given her and handed it to the driver

He laughed You were delayed so long that I started pre paring your dinner

Oh you cook? I asked unable to contain the astonishment I felt

Sometimes he remarked casually, I help Muriel He started apologizing for not coming to the airport Your arrival time coincided with the lesson of one of my pupils

'Don t mention it, I said

Besides he continued, I knew you wouldn t mind being greeted first by a charming lady

We had a delightful ride from the airport I said

His pacing up and down the living room was distracting for his footfalls were heavy on the floor

Mrs DeFranco asked from the kitchen if I ate meat

I do I said I had been about to say no for I did not welcome the ordeal of cutting it, but my hunger got the best of my shame

She sighed with relief John and I have been playing guessing games about it

I promised my mother I would gain some weight and my father that I would eat any and everything in America

Even beef? she asked in astonishment and I mechanically recited the sentence from my grammar book When in Rome do as the Romans do

Then Mrs DeFranco served the dinner and while she was filling our glasses she casually remarked The peas are at twelve o clock, the meat balls at six and spaghetti is in the middle

Do you understand that code? asked Mr DeFranco

No I said

We use the clock dial to locate the food on the plate

It is an ingenious way of doing it Mrs DeFranco remarked and you would hardly find any blind in America who would not understand it I was sure that blind everywhere knew it

Darling you forget Mr DeFranco interrupted that India has many primitive conditions and without a doubt work for the blind there is very backward

There is nothing in India I snapped primitive or back ward

The quiet sound of Mr DeFranco drinking his water stopped and after a paus he said I d dn t mean it that way

I m sorry I said I fting my water to drink We began to eat

I was glad that meat balls did not need to be cut and durs g Mrs DeFranco s trips to the kitchen I took my largest bites of spaghetti The stubbo n peas whi h kept sliding off the plate, and my con tant w shing Mr DeFranco a vay in the kitchen p evented the onversation at the table from being more than desultory

My fa t wh h had lasted forty-eight hours from Ind a to Ame ica had left me weak and dizzy but the absence of the vigilant at l ne hostess and the frequent runs to the kitch en by M s DeFranco fi lly permitted me to fill myself comfo tably so that I as eady af er dinner to explore the lives of my new acquainta ces On we had finish d our apple pie a d settled into easy-cha r I asked M DeF anco if he would tell me about h ms lf

My l f he began is s mple and rather unromantic.

Oh I p r t ted you a e b ng mode t

No h said n a m tter-of fact way I spent twelve years a Perkin Institut for the Blind I entered when I was ix lef when I was eighteen Aft ome college work I came to New Yo k started g ing mu i l sso and appearing on radio now and the to sing married Mur el and h re I am.

As he spok I p t red to myself how similar a l fe to his might have h d Dr Hald r had tried to get me to Perkins a early as my seventh bi thday I might very well have studie music the e and th n l ke M DeFranco settled in New Yo as an accomplish d mu ician to live by my talents But mar riage?

As it was he had education gra e and independence an I had none of the.e

H w was y life at Perkin ? I a ked suppress ng th awe and envy I felt f r him

Not too d ffe ent from that of mill ons of other kids he sa

matter-of factly It was normal and uneventful We played and studied like all other children

What was it really like? I persisted

A great deal of fun, he added absently Fun, that s what it was

I projected into the word fun all the imagined qualities that I attributed to his life But I did not want him to say any more about his life at Perkins, because I had a vague feeling he might spoil it for me

Now that you know all about me he said, tell me about yourself

'Yes, do, Mrs DeFranco added We have heard so much about India It must be a very exciting place

While I was silently wondering whether my hosts would be interested in the Panditji, my music teacher the division of India or Ram Saran s comment on Partition – it was all in the cards – Mrs DeFranco asked if I would mind very much if she finished the dishes

'Not at all I said I am rather tired now but perhaps some day we can have a long talk about my past in India

Soon, I hope, she said touching me on my knee and added with a smile which I could hear Don t worry your English will improve very rapidly And then in a moment from the kitchen I could hear the plates clattering as Mrs DeFranco washed them swiftly

No matter how tired I felt I knew I could not go to sleep until I had the answer to one more question from Mr DeFranco

How did you happen to get married like this? I asked bluntly

What do you mean? he said laughingly

'I mean how did it come about? How did you meet her?

'Very simple he said When I came to New York she was living in the same apartment house that I was We met at the door coming and going I asked her out one night and we came to know each other better, and there you are

Just like that? I asked for my curiosity was barely whetted

Of course he said

Incredible, I could not resist adding

Only a week before coming to the States I had sat with my father in New Delhi and we had talked about marriage His manner was candid his tone serious and compassionate

You are old enough so that whether you want it or not you will think about marriage You will of course not get married for some years but you will start thinking about it

I won t I said determinedly

Don t be shy – it s biological. I wanted to talk with you about this now as I don t know how long you will be away from home or when I will see you again

I waited all the time thinking about the sea voyage we had planned together I was sad for him and for me, because the views which he might have imparted to me in two or three weeks had now to be squeezed into the drab hours late in the night

My thoughts are wandering he said fumbling for words You think you might marry a Westerner? he asked dryly

Of course not! I said emphatically overcoming the initial shock of the question

I have seen a lot of Anglo-Indians he continued the pace of his speech increasing Anglo-Indians who are fathered by some nameless Englishman and have for their mother some poor Indian You know what their condition is like?

But he did not pause for an answer

They are ashamed of their mothers because they are black women These so-called Anglo-Indian children consider themselves white and superior to their Indian mother They have the audacity to speak of England as home They speak of a country they will never see as their home. Home indeed! he said contemptuously

The truth is they have no home no land they can call their own no father who will own them and no mother whom they will respect I – I would remain a bachelor before I would father such a lot He added reflectively In India at least.

It hurt me to say this he continued with his voice returning to its normal pitch because the irony is that I believe in one

world and I have never believed in the nonsense of superiority of nationalities and races

There was a calm a fertile moment of communication which I did not choose to break with any response

Remember, he went on slowly I am speaking of the most degenerate of the Anglo Indians They are to be pitied rather than condemned, and again do not forget there are exceptions upon exceptions who do become assimilated into our society

There is more than a mere connexion between what I have been saying about the Anglo Indians and what everyone has been saying about your becoming a misfit in both India and America because of your leaving home so young Fifteen is a young, a very young age to be going away

He paused and the straining silence was enough to empha size the danger and gravity of the situation

Marriage, he began again is I believe crucial to a full and rich life, and perhaps even more so in your case I am fifty five – an old age for India and then slowly he repeated a very old age So far you have lived through the eyes of our family But your leaving home now, my death and the marriage of your sisters and brothers will change it all Neither your mother and father nor your sisters and brothers can be there all your life to help you live it fully

I can never hope to marry you in India well I am going to be cruel and realistic To marry you in India would be like trying to marry your sister without her face I bring this terri fying image to mind because I want you to understand fully how important people think eyes are in any kind of sexual relationship Men and women fall in love and make love with their eyes Again the irony is that I don t believe that blindness cripples a man sexually and I think there exists no psycho-logical evidence for it but you don t read psychological text books to people when you are asking them to give their girl in marriage

Oh you could get married in India all right, but not well not happily, because the kind of girl you would want could no

be found here Once you have seen the other side of the co n I mean a Western marriage you will want a life compani n equal to yourself

India is a harsh land Marriage here is like a business transaction and people weigh and measure their liabilities and assets ca efully In the States no doubt you blindness would make marriage difficult though I believe not impossible because there values are diffe ent and marriage is made by the two people in volved without the agency of parents But all this you will find out only by li ing the e

One more thing I would have you remember In the melting pot of America th problem of the Anglo-Indian does not exist, but here it does At the same time you duty and service will neve cease calling you ba k to India where your roots l e deep

The lonely image of my ister without her face was with me duri g th dinner and while Mr DeFranco and I sat in the easy ch i

There mu t be mor I stupidly insisted Mr DeFranco laughed and said Th e is really nothing mo e Except he added u s i ne of tho e sto i s where they li ed happily ev r fter

M s D Franco came in fr m the k tchen and said to her husband Perhap dear you could show him the apartment and the bath while I make his bed on the studio couch

So Mr DeF anco took m around his two- oom apartment with the adjoin ng k t hen and bath casually putting my ha d o e the sc een separ ting the li i g room f om their bedroom, over the double bed h s wr ting-de k the radio-phonograph combination in the l ving oom, and then the bathtub and the refr ger tor Th apartment seemed t m small in fact crowded, with barely enough pace betw en the dining oom table and the radio-phonograph t allow one to pass through to the kit chen

Mr DeFranco sa d how ver It is a very comfortable apart ment fo both f us and we a e very happy in it

My small studio-couch bed was made and after formally saying good night to my hosts I climbed into it. I m not go ng

to think about anything, I thought, nothing not even the empty, hollow feeling You can at least think about the air hostess Why can t you think about your mother? She didn t give you a lecture before you left home

Mrs DeFranco returned once more from behind the screen of their bedroom and quietly whispered her breath warm I don t know whether you have refrigerators in India or not but I didn t want you to worry at the noise of ours The motor of our refrigerator makes dreadful sounds all through the night I hope you don t mind

Not at all Mrs DeFranco, I said, turning my face up to her

Oh, she said, I meant to tell you Call me Muriel and my husband John

Of course, I barely said Good night Muriel

Sweet dreams, she lightly said as she walked away behind the screen

Wake up Bells in Arkansas

I PASSED my two weeks with the DeFrancos happily and then the time came for them to leave for their summer holidays in Maine They invited me to go with them

August days are the most glorious days in Maine they said. And Muriel remarked Even if you don t see the beauty you feel it in your bones

Every time John said, I get into the boat lower the line into the water and feel the weight of the string on the rod then and then only I feel I m really alive You like to swim? he asked abruptly

I don t know how I said

We will teach you Muriel said

Yes and there is nothing like feeling the water against your body John said

You are not afraid of the water are you? Muriel asked

Not at all I responded I have been in swimming pools a number of times but no one would teach me to swim in India, because they thought I might hit my head against the pool wall

Rubbish! John snapped You can feel the wall of a pool approaching with your facial vision as easily as you can sense any other object

But anyway Muriel interrupted in Maine we won t be swimming in pools

I noticed that John and Muriel talked about Maine as I might have talked about my bicycle in Rawalpindi They might even have bicycles in Maine, I thought and vast stretches of land for riding

On our way up to Maine if you wish we can stop in Watertown and you can talk to Farrell about going to Perkins rather than to that miserable, wretched place in Arkansas John said.

'I don t want you to go to the South Besides that s no place to learn English I just can t imagine how your parents thought of sending you to Arkansas Why, it s a state school You ll be the only one paying for board and tuition Now that you are here I am certain Farrell will let you attend Perkins

That day one of Muriel s friends visited her and told us they were having a serious polio epidemic in Arkansas For my benefit Muriel s friend explained Polio is quite a common disease in America, especially in the summer Muscles of your body get paralysed and sometimes you can never walk again and some times you die One of my friends had polio I was already feeling numb, for Muriel s friend was gifted with unusual ima ginative powers I decided I would not go to Arkansas after all

But when I called Mr Woolly on long distance that evening he said Son we re anxiously waiting for you Don t stay in New York any longer The school starts in another two weeks and you should come out early to get used to our set up What, you re afraid of polio? Fear more than anything else brings it about he said, laughing Son, when should I expect you?

I would go to Arkansas After all, Mr Woolly had been the only one to invite me to America

There was a fence, a very high fence higher than anything one could imagine There were sheep and sheep and more sheep and they were lined up in an endless line One sheep jumped the fence and there went another and yet another and another still The fence was getting higher but the sheep were jumping higher

And now I myself was a sheep and the one on my right was whispering in my ear You ll never make it I tell you you ll never make it and I could feel all the eyes of the heep watching me

He s frightened one yelled and ano her said Incarnated humans make bad sheep and they all laughed My mu les hardened and the fen e seemed higher than the Himalayan Mountains themselves The sheep on my lef said You can make it Thank the Lord you can t see, because that way

was this school to which I had travelled ten thousand miles? I would write home tomorrow and tell them about it and I tried to recollect the clear visual image which I had painstakingly acquired of the building while going around with Mr Woolly that morning None of the other students had as yet arrived

The building was utilitarian and symmetrical and not hard to visualize One side of the building was reserved for the girls and the other for the boys In the centre of the main floor was a small corridor off which were six classrooms each with a capacity for ten to fifteen students one auditorium and a two-room office where the superintendent the principal and the bookkeeper had their desks

On the second floor above the corridor was a small library and music conservatory separating the girls sleeping accommodations from the boys , and below the corridor in the basement, adjoining the kitchen and a few other classrooms were two dining rooms, one for the students and the other for the faculty members

Like the girls the boys dormitories were partitioned into three sections one for the small boys, that is under ten another for the boys ranging in age from ten to fourteen and then there was the section for the older boys in which I was placed Allotted to me was a small locker, about six feet tall and two feet wide in a long room with twenty nine similar lockers arranged in a double row with two sinks at the end I was assigned a bed in the sleeping hall upstairs a room holding thirty such beds with hardly more than a foot of space separating one bed from the next Along with the older boys I would also have the use of a small lounge off the locker room Scattered between various sections of dormitories for older and younger boys and girls were small rooms for the faculty members

The architect had conceived and executed the buildings so capably that the entire student body ranging in age from five to thirty and comprising in number a little over one hundred along with a dozen and a half faculty members including the superintendent and the principal not to mention the m[illegible]nance help could be accommodated in a building

th ee times the s ze of the cramped Dadar School for the Bl nd in B mbay or my home in Lahore The architect must h ve miscalculated slightly however for there were three small cottage like proj ctions at the back of the building One of these was an industrial shop for teaching the students carpentry and cha r caning a other was a gymnas um which served a dual function – it was a place fo calisthenics and wrestling matches and was also us d for S turday n ght dances and the last projection absorbed the overflow of the g rls from the ma n building

The corrid containing the main classrooms had on the boys s de a att a ti wh ch bviou ly had not been part of the o ig nal plan and had been added only that summer Behind a clum ly bu lt fr hly painted cou ter the e was a small refrigerat r hold ng bottles of soft dr nks w th a chocolate case at its id and I was told that high school seniors were to maintain this concern

Lying in my bed I ur eyed the building as I had gone over t room by oom that morning Each time I reconstructed the build ng i my imagi ati n it seemed smaller and smaller and I wo dered h w this mpty buil ling would feel once the one hundred students retur d to the scho l and l fe was restored to the empty h lls Even in my bedroom the farthest ext emity of the bu lding with my door hut I could hear th disquieting sound of the freezer moto a d I also remembered hearing the bookkeeper s typewrit that m n ng in my locker room. It would not be at all impossibl I thought to hear in the boys lou ge g ls c n ersing at the other end of the bu lding

But it would be two we ks before a y students would return. Why had I been dreaming of Abdul? Were there to be Abduls to haras me her also? But I was big now twice no maybe three times the si e I had been in the Dadar S hool and I was sleeping in the older boys dorm tory The freezer m tor had stopped running I knew it would start back again as it always d d a d I l stened Everythi g wa absolutely still

At the head of my bed ther wa a wi dow but nothing rustled outside. Th air was still in that hot August night, and

the building seemed hollow and deserted I could not bear the silence All of a sudden something started to rattle loudly I was paralysed with fright, for the sound was threatening and it seemed to fill the whole building I jumped out of my bed and ran down the stairs shouting Is anyone here is anyone here? My words echoed from hall to hall Listen what was that sound? Someone was hammering Where? But the sound could not be placed, for it was irregular and reverberating I was shouting frantically Then I heard footsteps starting from the other end of the building, the girls end and shuffling rapidly on the floor I waited, then I heard the muffled voice of an elderly, a very elderly, man call out, Anything the matter?

I did not answer

He stopped right in front of me looking the other way, asking still Where are you? Anything the matter?

Listen I barely articulated and then his body brushed against mine as he swiftly turned about

Oh, there you are, he said, putting his hand on my shoulder What s the matter? Are you homesick? Calm yourself sir

But that sound that sound, can t you hear it? Are you deaf?

Oh, that he said Those are the steam pipes

Steam pipes? I repeated questioningly

Steam pipes with which we heat the building in the winter They were working on them today and they must have left them on or something

I hate it, I said, I hate every bit of it I want to go home

His hand was trembling on my shoulder I heard him gulp loudly Then he said, I am only the night watchman here, can I help you?

Leave me alone! I snapped

Then I heard his retreating footsteps, and I wanted to run after him and tell him I was sorry Old men were always kind and understanding They left you alone when you asked them to – maybe there were other such old men at the school who would put their hand on your shoulder and would not say anything to you that embarrassed you

I went outside and sat down on the ledge next to the side door When my heart returned to its normal tempo and I stopped feeling it was going to leap out of me I decided to do some exploring I wanted to see what else there was besides the building and I started walking around First I started circling the main building I timed myself I could do it in ten minutes if I walked fast There were many grass patches around the building which I had not encountered that morning Later that night I also found behind the cottages what seemed to be a large wooded area I walked a little way in the woods and found the ground to be rough and piled up with a few inches of thick dry leaves which crackled under my bare feet I did not want to go back inside I found an even stretch carpeted with leaves and sprawled down smoothing the leaves under me

I slept soundly but when I awoke the morning had set in and it was pleasantly cold I walked to the front door of the building and found the watchman sitting inside the door As I entered he asked Are you feeling better sir?

Very well I said

He got up and brushed the back of my shirt.

Promise you won't tell anyone about –

Of course not he said I understand perfectly Well it's almost five thirty he continued and it's time for me to leave. Will you be all right?

Yes of course I said confidently and walked through the centre of the corridor to the boys end of the building

Everything was strange strange and incomprehensible. School had been going for some time before I grew accustomed to the routine and all the babble of voices in the locker room the comments and the jokes made in the classroom seemed as irrelevant to my education as the noise of the subway station in New York With my head bent slightly forward I would carefully listen to the name of the student introduced to me and would try to remember his voice and the shape of his hand. Gradually almost at a snail's pace people by the very repetition of their mannerism and thanks to my growing familiarity with

the English language, began to imprint their personalities upon my mind To the students I was in the beginning an object of curiosity, but once they found out that I had neither long hair nor a beard, as many Sikhs do, nor any other distinctive charac teristic, they accepted me as just another boy Indeed after the first week they never asked me any questions about India

The avalanche of impressions at the beginning of school had so overwhelmed me that my senses had been deadened Now as I became firmly entrenched in the routine my senses of sound smell and touch came alive

It was a Saturday night, and such was the din in the locker room that it was all I could do to stay in it and continue dress ing, a boy called Other was jovially whistling as he shaved, the hot water running in a steady stream Kenneth was desperately trying to get hold of one of the half sighted fellows to choose a tie for him Is George in the room? George? Where did Pat go? he was shouting in his high cracking voice Bill who had evidently finished dressing was practising on his clarinet with Max, who had once said I can t stand Billy s playing trying to drown out the music by singing at the top of his lungs

Big Jim had his shoe propped on the long bench which sepa rated the two rows of lockers and he was complaining that Joe was not giving him a good enough shine What the hell do you expect for a nickel? Joe retorted loudly apparently trying to enlist the sympathies of the other students in the locker room

Joe' said Big Jim in an earnest voice if that blind Kenneth there isn t able to see his face in the toes of my shoes I ll beat your brains out, and you ll never be able to think for the rest of your life.

Can Joe think? queried a boy in passing

By now the line had formed behind Other and a number of voices were prodding him to finish his shave You ve been shaving for all of ten minutes now

Just be grateful you don t have a stubble like mine, Other said

But Othe plead d another boy in a more urgent tone the danc is o ly half an h r a ay

Pat e a i u Oth t a d but h vas through and was walk g m l y fr m th k

I a b it l w t y ng t o t ut ocks f om the bottom of my lock n l h k aught m ight in my back Imme diately Oth r flu g h ba hairy arm arou d my neck and laugh gly j l g J H t e mell d l an of ha ing soap and h (ha l w j aw g my new wh t hirt which I h d ju t j t n H h i l e ru ni g the front f my shirt b t I d d ot y a y h ng b au e I wa ous about the dan e a l l k b wa n y f a o d ng the ordeal I w al ly g g li y The l ng nar o w oom was hot and st ffy t b a l hp h j lt h and d odorant hair o l d h g a f m l a p r t atmo phe e which hung th o m ff t ngly a d the od u got thi ker and h a h t h j p t n p ogr s d fo the Saturday n ght da

F t Ch rh t d f m the h w a unc ng his pres n by th m j ng th w g ng doo loudly i his customary v a

A h t J O h an l K n eth both houted to him to c m l p h l th s

A l ll l h m t by hi knam Come here you On E l B ll

J c w l g d t lly Let th poor boy g t h m elf dressed

Y u u l) x A l a j d H c you e r heard f bull g t g d J Y u d t ha e to how your blindness so b ly

J m w t ll gu ng w h Joe b t h t me bout the d nce What j la u J Y h w up at a y of the d nce I t b a yo do t ha e nough m ney to buy your girl a Cok th

O her j i J t h t e d f th locker oom B g Jim if you a get J e t g t th dan I ll gi e h m a n ckel ma be a l m w th w ll be enough fo both of th m

Oh hell wh t w uld I d at th dance? Joe said dis-

couraged, and although Big Jim still sneered loudly, Other didn t say anything

Fat Charlie continued dressing and simultaneously walking from locker to locker inspecting the boys clothes He was standing next to my locker, tying Kenneth s necktie I waited I knew his one eye would scan me next

You seem set to kill, he said turning towards me

I hope not I answered with an instantaneous smile He straightened my tie put a few strands of hair in place on the back of my head with his comb, and with no ceremony was gone For the first time that evening all the muscles in my body relaxed The din and the gaudy smell were transformed into a hilarious gaiety and colourful scent I felt like a person totally inexperienced forced to audition and then accepted to play a part which was contrary to his character To be sure I was still in the dressing room but the mere attention of Fat Charlie was as encouraging as the attention of an accomplished actor to the nervous and inexperienced novice Being fully dressed I stayed by my locker anxiously awaiting the dress rehearsal The boys were gradually filing out of the room and it was clear they were going to the end of the building for their girl friends At last the clock outside struck eight and I followed the boys who called themselves members of a club with bachelor tendencies the word tendencies being used it was explained to indicate the dynamic hence changing attitudes of the members

The walk from the main building to the gymnasium was hardly more than a fraction of a block and by the time we entered the music was blaring and at least half of the high school were gathered in the hall which was hardly twice the size of our drawing room at home Having never held a girl or danced a step I stood back against the wall listening to the bustling activity on the floor, activity which seemed all the more lively as the room was small and the floor so crowded even where I stood someone would brush against me now and then Standing there alone amidst this light hearted gaiety I felt exposed to the full view of all until I reminded myself that

No one stirred, but there was a round of mocking snores

Rise up men, the housemaster would go on The cook is cooking ham and eggs and is going to serve you a large glass of orange juice with pep-up cereal

The ham and eggs brought varied responses Sometimes the lips of high voiced Kenneth smacked and sometimes Chubby Ernie, as everyone called him said in a muffled voice with his head, it seemed buried in his blanket I haven t had ham and eggs for years and I ve been at this here school for nine already, nine times longer than you ve been And there s nothing but dried up toast and sloppy eggs once in a while for breakfast, and maybe starchy cereal

Ignoring all this, the housemaster would say On your feet March, my Christian soldiers And he would leave with This is the last call to breakfast just as the clock downstairs began to strike six forty five There was always the sound of feet scraping groping for slippers Those few who still slept got the customary treatment from George and Pat There were screams and shouts as the two turned someone s bed over swung it from side to side or propped it precariously on creaking wicker chairs which stood by every bed Some boys were cursing them for tipping them over Others were protesting that they were awake The housemaster was back in the hall scolding George and Pat, inspecting the beds and prodding the boys

Downstairs, two or three people were sharing one sink in the locker room Eight people were crowded into the small cubicle with only three shower spouts Boys half awake were singing whistling splashing water running from locker to sink and back to their lockers The housemaster had come down by now and standing in the half ajar locker room door, called Three minutes to line up two minutes and fifty eight seconds to line up and so on As the clock struck seven fifteen there was a rush at the locker room door everyone hustling to be marshalled into line in whatever state of dress provided of course that by the time we reached the door of the dining room our shirts were buttoned and our pants zipped Grace pronounced, we would take our assigned places at tables seating six

but I wanted to have that illusion if only for a moment to find out where and how I fitted into the social crossword puzzle

There were more bells, bells beckoning to gymnasium clas ses I went down to the damp and murky gym grabbed a suit from a pile of gym clothes and hastily putting it on ran up-stairs There were sounds of boys punching the punching bag and the unbearable smell of sweating bodies on the worn-out mats The teacher blew the whistle went around the small wooden floor placing everyone in position on the mats and a session of calisthenics began with his rasping voice calling the numbers We instantaneously responded by bending our bodies, stretching our muscles and hopping to the drone of his voice

I dreaded making mistakes because I never liked the bending body of my gym teacher, his naked and bulging stomach greasy with perspiration – the body which would crawl all over me trying to show me how to hold my ankles as I swayed from side to side or how to touch my toes without bending my knees

After the calisthenics we returned to the dressing room once more with three or four trickling shower spouts for all the boys and then we were marched off to the dining room for dinner, where two sighted teachers continuously kept their watchful eyes on the dining table etiquette of the students Ever since Miss Harper had taught me how to find the end of a piece of meat with my fork and then saw it off with my knife or how to find the bone of a pork chop to cut it out I could manipulate these implements with a great deal of facility and I did not have to go hungry any more

After dinner there was a study hall and all the students in the upper grades were crowded into the small library Then at eight o clock there was another session of gymnastics, and finally an hour free just before bedtime The housemaster whom every student mimicked effectively put us to bed just as he got us out of bed He would wander in and say haltingly Cen s nighty nighty You are all old and wise men and know the rules that all must be asleep fas asleep by ten thirty But we were neither old nor wise and it was some time before all were asleep

horses you had to justify your worth and existence to the horses You had, somehow, to prove to them that you could carry as much weight as they could, and if you couldn t move as fast, you at least were willing to work harder and put in longer hours

Anything you do wrong in the world of the seeing, Mr Chiles had said, like dressing untidily or putting your elbows on the table while eating even if half the sighted world themselves commit the e sins people around you will chalk it up to your blindness They ll call you poor wretches feel sorry for you, and they will commit the worst sin of all by excusing it because you re blind

So we were marshalled in groups and marched into classes where we were given good common sense lessons – that you had to introduce young to old rather than vice versa that it was good to avoid wearing brown and blue together even if you did not know what brown or blue signified and that if you could not eat an orange half with a spoon it was better not to eat oranges at all At the same time we were told that no matter how independent blind people became they must always accept help from the sighted graciously recognizing that the feeling for helping the blind was the result of a generous impulse

When Ernest a ked If you went to a restaurant and they served you oranges in halves and you couldn t eat them and the waitress offered to feed you should you accept the help? he was abruptly told not to make light of serious matters

As part of the social adjustment programme, we also had personal private conferences with the faculty, who pointed to individual defects which they did not care to criticize in public Ernest told us that his adviser suggested that he wash hi feet more often Joe reported that he was to start using a deodo ant Kenneth said he got a lecture to keep his mouth closed at l a t some of the time

No blind person should be caught dead petting in public and one teacher went so far as to say that it migh be be er t avoid kis ing your wife or husband in publi just in ca

m ght be a misunderstanding We ere carefully examined on this material in written tests and it was a tribute to the teachers that no one failed

The mo e serious side of the social adjustment programme was concerned w th fac al vi ion and the teaching f mobility One day ea ly in spring all the totally bli d students were herded into the gym a ium and a ked to run through an obstacle cou se Plastic and wooden slabs of all sizes and weights were suspe ded f om the eili g ar und the gymnasium Some f them hung as low as th waist others barely came down to the forehead Th e labs ere tated at a ying speeds and the blind were asked t v lk thr ugh the labyrinth at as great a peed as po ble w th ut bumping i to th obstacles The purpose of keepi g the slabs mo ing was to prevent the students f om getting accu t m d to their po iti n a d to force them t stra n e ry pe ept ry ability to s nse the presence of the obtacles The thinner th lab a d the higher its pos tio the harder it was to fe l hea it – that is to say to sense the p essure of th object aga t the skin – a p ssu felt by the myriad of po e bo e b low and ne t t o ear Some of the slabs were f a eve fainte ma s tha the slimmest solitary lamp-post on a st eet or e Th bsta le cours h lped gauge ho well an i di idual c uld d ti gu sh had mass from another a d having located th on el st to h m circumvent it without runn ng i t yet a the Here was where the wheat was separated f m the chaff

A pe o who ha k ock d about fea les ly – and it is a help if he wa bl ded in his h ldhood – ll d mu h better in this test of f cial i o than a indi idu l who ither lost his sight late i life o has been re trained from d el ping the f ll range of his co-o d nated s n Ha ing of co rs during my ch ld hood jumped from banister to ban t r f om roof t roof and r d 'en my b cycle through famil ar places crowded with unlocated object – and that too at a mu h faster rate of speed – for me, g i g through this ob tacle cou e as ch ld s play The gymnasium w s kept qu et so that th blin l people c uld h ar the obstacles alth ugh I could n t h lp feeli g that I could have

run through the labyrinth with a jet buzzing overhead When someone cracked his head against one of the slabs and the others discovered who had done it, they would laugh merci lessly, until, of course, they themselves ran smack into one

After we had spent three or four class sessions running through this obstacle course, we were given a theoretical briefing on the importance of facial vision – that the blind ought to put the same emphasis on it as sighted do on seeing and that the way to develop it was through abandonment of fear and through complete relaxation We were also briefed on a few stock secrets of the trade, such as that the head should always be held high in order to more easily walk a straight line, that some found that a hardly perceptible arching of the back helped to minimize any injuries frontally received and that compass directions – determined sometimes by the sun against the cheek – were better than remembering lefts and rights In time, he would get the knack of such things as going into unfamiliar stores and finding the right counter or finding an elevator in a strange building

We were also advised that in crossing streets it was safer to walk with the traffic rather than to follow pedestrians as they might be crossing against the light In crossing streets without lights, safety depended entirely upon the ingenuity of the blind individual in gauging the distance of the cars correctly although it was helpful in crossing wider streets to take them in parts or in halves Above all one must never get panicky and run across a street

Each instructor then was assigned two or three students and with cane in hand bus token in pocket, we separated for down town My instructor gave me a list of trifling if not embarrass ing things to purchase from scattered counters in a Rexall drug store, and then asked me to meet him at the coffee shop of a departmental store for a milk shake the treat being dependent upon my success in making the purchases I was specifically told not to ask for help and even if it were voluntarily offered I should try to decline provided I could do so gracefully I did not know whether the instructor would keep his wat [illegible]

on me but whether h did or not it vas important to me that I should do vell on the first day of indep ndence

I sta t d our by tappi g the ane in front of each foot before tak ng a tep as I had b n taught Thi was supposed to ward off tripp ng ove k b d opping nt a ma ih le or meeti g some oth ch b t l in l n ng decl n ng I found that the noi e t h e made m rv elf consc ous and was quite distracting o I flung t to the gutte at the end of the drive way n fro t of the hos l a d ha i g made a mental note of th pot that I m ght p k up the an my return I started walki g rap lly t w d the b t p t h my hands thrust int my pock t Rath tha wa t the neare t bu stop I de ded I ul l alk th ee r f blocks to the next one Just to te t my f al I t d th lamp po t and tried to gue the di t f m wh ch I f t perc ed th m

Th s n a r f ll n so glo v alth ugh there vas just th igh pr port n f br ze m k ng the heat not severe but plea nt I f r th b ee e a s ge tl that it di tu bed my fa l i all a d I uld en pe er e the curves a d ligh p gr l s > th t et though that tre t was totally u fam lia t n H whe I unexpect dly stepped off a k rb th t f a t n f n l b tw e the kerb and the street as so f ght g l al so t he l I had my can back – that ca wh ch my n tr t all d th third leg of a blind man although B g J m h d r ma ked that t was m re like a d s plac d ta l I f u d th gh that oon my foot start d register ing a ligh l a n t f the l f the sidewalk a d that wa lu ough T m l f n he eet the e was a steady stream of c r g ng bo h way t I gu ssed about forty miles an hou Th w r sound of F d mot r Ch v olets and I even emembe h a i g a f w Bu ck engines Walking on that s reet I f lt nf d t and happy I imagined a driver would feel with a t f ma hi t th c mmand f h s f et Then I heard the cl ng r g ib att n f th lect c wir just abo e the traffic My in tru t r ha l t l J m to l sten for t as a s gn of the approaching tra kl r ll v Th n almo t a block behind me I di tingui hed th sound f th trolley m tor from the rest of

the traffic The bus stop was still a block and a half ahead of me and I knew I had to catch that trolley because it would be twenty minutes before the next one With the ever increasing sound of the trolley motor in my ears, I started running as fast as I could to the bus stop I wished there were the shadow of a wall or a fence, to my right, to run by As it was there was empty space to my right and the hindering noise of the traffic to my left, a narrow sidewalk with a string of lamp posts and heaven knew what other hazards I skirted one lamp-post by a hair s breadth, and another actually caught my shoulder, but not my head

When I got to the next intersection the trolley was almost abreast If I waited to listen for the sound of the traffic I could not possibly make it, so I dashed across the street, thinking of what I had repeated to my mother a long time ago

Death comes only once, I had said

But, she had said what if you lose a leg?

That had been frightening all right

After that I wouldn t want to live I don t mind being blind but a wheel chair

Maybe if I had a white cane in my hand I wouldn t have to worry as much about the traffic and the bus driver would know I was blind and would wait for me But it is better this way I thought

Just when I perceived the looming shadow of the bench at the bus stop about ten or fifteen feet away from me the trolley passed me If only someone would be waiting there I wished, so that the trolley will at least stop But no one was and I missed the trolley

With a discouraged heart I slowly walked up to the bench out of breath and sat down It would be twenty minutes more twenty whole long minutes and maybe I wouldn t get my milk shake after all I took out my Braille watch and kept my fingers fixed on the hands and I heard car after car pass by I felt as envious of the drivers inside as a man standing in a rain storm trying to thumb a ride although I myself had no intention of flagging down a car

town, I would get the various stores located by keeping track of how many doors up they were from the street corner It was as simple as that

My instructor had said that there were a number of ways of telling when you got to the street corner It could be done by the noise of the traffic, the draft of air or the receding shadow of the windows At last I was at the double doors of the department store I went in and started walking back towards the elevator listening for the sound of its door Inside the elevator, I found my instructor

As soon as we sat down in the restaurant he said laughingly, You shouldn t have asked that man for the shoelace counter

And how was I to know where to find it? I retorted By th smell of it?

You gave me the slip he said that is until I saw you running from inside the trolley that you missed But I picked you up again at the drug store So he had watched me!

The first thing he was saying admonishingly is that you ve got to admit to yourself that you are blind and that there are certain things you just can t do like throwing away your cane and crossing streets without listening for traffic

He was right of course I wouldn t make a habit of crossing treets that way but the cane – that was another matter I had never hooked a cane in front of my bicycle when I rode it so I did not see why I had to carry one when walking if I did not mind taking the chance of falling into a manhole As for letting drivers know I was blind I felt safer relying on myself than on their judgement Maybe it was all rationalization like that of Benjamin Franklin when he stopped being a vegetarian be cause he saw a little fish in the open stomach of a big fish about to be cooked

You ll carry that cane my instructor said threateningly If no you won t be allowed to leave campus

Yes sir, I replied

The milk shake was there now and putting the raw be tween my teeth I let it drain down my throat It was cool and delicious and I forgot about the cane All of a sudden I felt

and from my left eye everyone would always know that I was blind

How much can you see? she asked

Just enough to get around I replied That way, I thought, there would be no fuss about her taking me right to the door of the school and helping me in

You know, she said – we had just overtaken the trolley – 'you half sighted people are the link between the world of the blind and the world of the seeing

Yes ma am I said That was the first time the words half sighted had ever sounded good to me

The blind must have a world all their own don t you think? she asked

It s just a world minus eyes I said It s what one might call a world of four senses instead of five

But you have developed your senses so much more acutely, and to see a blind person get around is so amazing to me until, of course I remind myself that they have extra senses

They don t have any extra senses ma am I said unless you call facial vision that Sometime try to find a door in the dark and believe me ma am you ll find even you have some facial vision

They must have extra senses she said emphatically She probably had not even listened to what I had said If you were totally blind you would know what I am talking about

I was too tired to argue and leaning back against the seat, I relaxed while she lectured me about the extra senses of the blind the car all the time moving swiftly through traffic

Bringing the car to a stop she said Here we are I thanked her and go out of the car right in front of the long driveway leading to the school She drove away I found my cane where I had left it It had a spring at the tip so that when you tapped it the cane would automatically spring up I stood there just spring ing the cane up and down listening to the tapping sound The more I tapped the les I liked it I knew I couldn t get used to it even if I wanted to The spring made it worse rather than be ter

I had been circumscribed in the building compounds like a prisoner whose every friend is a prison mate and whose every impression of the world outside is coloured by day to-day minute observations of the happenings within the walls For me it was like watching life in the United States with a jaundiced ear I learned among other things that to be blind was to be jobless because employers did not like hiring blind people especially for temporary work But the tireless efforts of Mr Woolly finally secured me a job working forty eight hours a week for one hundred dollars a month at an ice-cream plant Covering each day a distance of about four miles in trolleys and buses while going to and from work hammered home with full force the realization that the world outside by no means accepted the capabilities of the blind at face value, as we had been led to believe by the flawless understanding of the seeing members of our blind society

I remember going out on crowded buses To my chagrin ladies would get up and offer indeed force me into their seats, and if I resisted I ran the risk of having everyone in the bus share in the scene, it was awkward and unbearable when often two or three people tried to direct me to my seat which I could have found quite well alone On my first day the bus had been comparatively empty and I had entered it without anyone s taking notice of my blindness But now travelling at seven thirty and five the morning and evening rush hours in packed buses with scarcely any room to stand it was hard to move in the crowded aisle without bumping into people and making my blindness apparent

Even in the restaurants where I used to go during my lunch hour were waitresses who took me for not only blind but deaf and who used to shout the menu attracting som times the attention of the whole restaurant If I were with someone they would turn to my guide and say What does he want? as though I were dumb and incapable of ordering for myself Sometimes trangers paid my bill probably moved by pity

When I cro sed intersections too which I could have managed

I heard then above the roar of the traffic a clattering noi e, beginning a block away Clack clack clack and I could almost forecast the next one Some blind man was walking on the sidewalk, finding his way with the help of a cane He must have very bad facial ision I thought to have to locate every wretched lamp post with a cane Clack clack clack I stood there running my hand up and down my new long thin cane with a fancy st ap instead of a handle at the top I took the two ends of the cane in my hands and putting my foot at the centre, pulled hard and broke it in two And fl nging it back into the gutter I walked rapidly towa ds the school bu lding I reached the building almost running with clack clack clack still ringing ears

I took the steps in front of the building two at a time and the lounge out of breath As always there was Joe humming a tune

Who s there? he asked

It s me I said You ought to be able to recognize my steps by n w

I guess so he said languidly and went back to humming his tune

I could not shake loo e the lonely image of the emptying aud to iurr foll w g g aduation ith a f w stragglers here and the e talki g boisterously as though to remind themselves that the occasion was one n t o ly of lemnity but of happi ess And then one by one the par nts whi ked away their children for the summer holidays and overnight the school building was empty an l t h lls as hollow as when I had first arrived there. The cook the watchman the bookkeeper and Mr Woolly w th his family we e the only inhabitants left in that once cramped and crowd d building For me there was n home to go to no parents to whisk me away There was only the prospect of an idle and drab summer ahead

With the etting in of the hot a d humid summer I realized how much I h d been a captiv f my school surr undings Until the launching f the mob lity programme in late spring,

Ozella, Jean and Helen, the girls I worked with, asked, What happened?

Nothing I muttered trying desperately to control the gathering tears, and after washing up I took my place between the long table covered with an aluminium sheet and the large open freezer which sent a draft of cold frosty air tickling the back of my neck While Ozella sacked the hundreds of Popsicles and Polar Bars which Helen and Jean kept dumping on trays, I boxed them and stacked the cartons one on top of another for Tommy to carry into the cold storage

I wished Jay would let me wash pans or work the sticking machine but, no, I was blind and Jay didn t want me to leave my place behind the table If you get hurt he said repeatedly 'the company is liable to sue But why would I be more likely to get hurt than Ozella Jean Helen Tommy or indeed Jay himself?

Helen, come here and box and please let me work the racks in the freezer, I begged I can do it Believe me I can

Helen did and it felt good pulling out large heavy freezer racks, weighed down with icy Popsicles and hardened Polar Bars and carrying them over to Ozella It was better than just standing eight hours a day six days a week boxing

'Be careful Ozella said The floor is wet

I couldn t get any more wet than I am now I said happily Then I heard the side door swinging and the footsteps of Jay in the large room He did not say anything but I knew he was watching I ll show him I kept thinking as I emptied the racks into Ozella s tray The manhole incident seemed to fade into the background and even the ladies who got up to give me their seats seemed good natured and well meaning That was it – one had only to show the sighted people by example what one could do and they would understand Actions always spoke louder than words ever could

I shuttled to and fro from the freezer to the table I heard the steady motion of Ozella s arms lifting the ice-cream bars from the trays, putting them into crackling sacks [illegible] They [illegible] watch ing me I thought, all of them every one of them All of a su [illegible]

You moved your queen right into the range of my bishop so I can take it, Ed said after one of my moves the first time we played

The girl on my left who was watching sighed conspicuously

Oh I said, she s all yours hiding the real remorse I felt at losing the queen so early in the game and forcing a smile as though it were a calculated move

No Ed said take the move back

'Why? I asked

'You didn t know my bishop was there You didn t see it'

Yes, the watchers chimed in Do let him take the queen back

Although I raged within I took my move back because I knew from Ed s tone that no matter how much I persisted he would not relent, and when one is blind one always has to make compromises even if they do leave a bad taste in one s mouth Once during the game he said I m sorry I didn t mean to move my rook there

A move is a move I replied brutally taking his castle At his next move I was ruthless again and he lost the game

You don t pull any punches he said and I thought I detected a bitter note

I guess not I said feeling sorry and glad at the same time

After that he used to wait for me to make a mistake and every time I did he would break into a hearty laugh exclaiming We got the master that time and there would be applause all around He stopped too trying to protect me in the swimming pool and whenever I did have a rough time I sensed that he watched with a gleeful eye and I was glad that I played chess with him ruthlessly

Once when I got off the bus and was getting ready to cross the very busy street in front of the Boys Club Joe Red who was the director darted across to me from the other side

Am I ever glad that you showed up!

You knew I would I said carelessly but why the reception?

Come in and I ll tell you he said and I walked a[illegible]

I went back to playing but she stopped me again and asked abruptly What is your religion?

I am a Hindu, I suppose, I answered not a little taken ab k by the unexpectedness of the question.

What does that mean? she persisted

It is hard to say, I said More than anything it is a way of life.

And while I groped for words she went on, Have you ever knov n Christianity?

I have known Christians, I began eagerly I went to an American missionary school for the blind in India And then, itantly, I met Deoji and the nurse there

Who are they? she interrupted

Chri tians, Indian Christians I said somewhat abashed I knew them well I thought I heard a sniff so I checked nyself

I am sorry, she began compassionately that you have never een shown the light – you who should be o sensitive be iuse of your blindness and sufferings I started drumming my ngers idly on the bench You must be baptized or you are amned for ever to hell and fire It is still not too late for you to saved and I want to help you, Ved Will you let me? she lead d

My fingers tapped on the bench more nervously

You have to be saved she went on so that you can go om and save others When I asked what saving was she plained rapturously, her speech gaining in tempo, how I had cept Christ and be prevented from sinning If you were not ed you were damned for ever damned Yes all Hindus l Muslims were damned even if no one had tried to sho n the light God always showed light to those whom he to save Did I not understand that he was working th ough ave mer

fingers were making a regular noise now S op ghtically That noise gets on my nerves mid air

'ed sounds of numerous ins rum nts

th religion which sent *pandits* to my mother to make her atone for my blindness as though she had brought it upon me herself, which made men like Qasim Ali and Ram Saran cut each other s th oats and which now enlisted Miss Doves as its agent for my conversion Conversion from what to what? I wondered Th most appalling thing it seemed to me at that time was that each individual was convinced that he was unerringly right

Mr Chiles in his class had used the analogy of a circle, trying to explain to Ray how he should regard the various Protestant denominations It is as though we were all standing in a circle and trying to reach the same centre but taking different paths Did that analogy hold for various religions?

Ray had not accepted Mr Chiles s analysis All paths can t be right Some must be dead wrong he had said, and yet he was already a preacher in a church

One afternoon not too long after that piano lesson a number of us were gathered around the vending stand drinking cold drinks Fat Charlie was helping Other carry in some cases of Coke

God damn it, Charlie said putting down the case it snagged my pants

Sssh Other shushed Watch yourself Bull Remember, you are among girls

Charlie cursed some more, defiantly but in guarded tones I doubt if many people heard him All of a sudden the loud but shaking voice of Miss Doves exclaimed Charles! and the hubbub subsided as though the boys had been fighting and th commanding voice of Mr Woolly had appeared on the scene

Charles, you you promi ed and just a day ago too the voice went on despairingly What am I going to do in this s hool

Then I heard the cli king heels of Miss Doves s shoes rapidly shuffling down the hall towards the music con ervatory Every one remained quie even af er the ound of the e being s en ce al The all of a udden What happen l? W in o her? What did you do Bulle and

religious work in our school will come to a close now because word about her activities is finally going to reach Mr Woolly

That it certainly will said Ernest

But even Mr Woolly, Other remarked, can t stop secret prayer meetings behind the piano

It was spring now There was the cool smell of sprouting grass and a fragrance of blossoming flowers and the distracting sound of the lawn mower, which streamed into the open windows of the classrooms Except perhaps the classes of Mr Chiles all the other junior high and high school classes came to a halt, as though the temperature outside were touching one hundred and twenty degrees, as in Lahore and it was too hot to study Actually that spring was one of the mildest and what heat there was was generated by politics – school politics

Whether it was because our constitution was new or because politics injected a new issue into the old and worn threadbare topics of conversation at our school students and teachers alike talked and campaigned as though it were a presidential election for the country rather than the measly prospect for a few people of winning honour and perhaps some glory but certainly not much power Whether I went to the locker room lounge or the sleeping hall there were always boys whispering and I always had to clear my throat loudly before entering so that I might not overhear Blind people hate more than anything [illegible] being overheard and I knew that well Sometimes I would [illegible] clear my throat fast enough and embarrassing phra[illegible] fall on my ears Although Kenneth had said You [illegible] go into politics if you don t want your toes steppe[illegible] though people were purposely aiming dumb [illegible]

Aw don t you know that Jane is old enough [illegible] and the only reason he s going with her is [illegible] girls votes? I overhear[illegible] Billy telling Joe when I [illegible] lounge You don t wan to vo[illegible] for him

And mild mannered Joe was [illegible]

don t know wha to d[illegible] O[illegible]her and [illegible]

And I because I was in the race [illegible]

the housemaster to read it aloud in the lounge, as he did with many of the boys letters

If you want I said handing over the letter to her hesitantly It was a note from my younger brother Ashok He had decided not to buy a new pair of shoes for a while because he wanted me to get my education

I have never heard you talk about home or your family, Jane said

Just then Lois came in so our conversation was cut short From that day we started going to the Saturday night dances together It was good also to have someone to take to the square dances which had just been organized a month before the election

You all jump up and you all come down Swing your partner right around Miss Harper was calling over the speaker Around me there were continuous shuffles of feet the shouts of some totally blind student who hadn t quite made the connexion with his partner and the loud huffing sounds of fast breathing Miss Harper was calling faster and faster

Come on, Miss Harper Kenneth shouted We can do it faster

And Miss Harper asked under her breath not interrupting the rhythm of the call Can you do it boys and girls?

We can the whole floor responded and the pace of Miss Harper s calling picked up even more until the words were hardly distinguishable from each other I wasn t listening to her any more but just going through the motions which came naturally I wished the square dance would never come to a halt and that all that night the next day and the day after I would stay in motion I did not want to know Jane s age I couldn t tell why but I just did no[illegible] I was not di[illegible] It was the floor beneath me that was going round and round

Texas Star a shou[illegible] went out and no sooner had we swi[illegible]ched the dance than Kenneth collided wi[illegible]h Lois head on and the whole movement came to a s[illegible]op It was as though the [illegible] whole gymnasium floor about hal[illegible] [illegible] and whirled the whole gymnasium floor about half [illegible] The floor, however was s[illegible]ll [illegible]ing in circles as tho[illegible]gh

and started rattling steampipes They shook those steampipes so hard, down in the basement, that they woke the whole bed room up and Arlie and Jack lectured the boys with steampipes rattling, about your candidacy They told them that Other wasn t fit to repre ent them if he had guts enough to disturb the whole dormitory, and I tell you, you ve got it in the bag Every boy who was awake then is with you one hundred per cent

'I hate politics, I blurted out, the steampipes and all

This is America, and you live in a democracy, Kenneth said Besides, I thought you wanted to go into politics as a career You ll need a harder stomach than you ve got.

I m through with it for ever, I said

By nightfall, when the Braille election ballots had been counted I had received two-thirds of the votes and was the new president of the student body Other was the first to come up to me Flinging his hairy masculine arms about me and spitting tobacco above my shoulder he congratulated me warmly as though I were a long lost brother A real Arkansan the boys used to call him solid as the Ozarks themselves good humoured as the best of the mountaineers

You should have got the election, I said That was my sincerest wish

To win and to feel remorse for your defeated opponent he said is a privilege of democracy

But the steampipes Other I said

Hells bells I did that knowing what I was doing I wanted you to win

We had been fast friends before but we were inseparable from that day on

Between the Lines

With the pa sing of each day and vith the lea ning of each new slang word or expres ion peculiar to Am ica the gulf between what vas home to me and what I was fast becoming grew wider and wides and sometimes in my gloomy moments it seemed for ever unbridgeable There ere always letter from home but it was as though all of them came in semi transparent e velopes Everyon at hom hoped that I wa making the best of every opportunity All of them lo ged to se me I was in their con stant thoughts Would I plea e look after my health Now and then a birth wa report d in the h me of one of ou relatives or the marr g of a distant cousin Sometimes the news concerned my immediat f mily like the marriage of si ter Umi to Lieu tenant Gautam India was changing he reminded me because had met Gautam in Bombay all by herself without as she ut it th h lp of the relay ng tation of our relatives Mother never wrote, because she could not use Engl sh and there was no one in A kan a who ould read Hindi Whenever I thought of this I felt ery depressed that I had come to Arkansas where during my whole stay I had not met another Indian or had a chance to speak Panjabi or Hindi

Beneath the urface of the simpl news from home of daily occurrences now and then ther was a line, or m r likely a tone whi h mad me stop and think what sac if ces my family wa go ng through to keep me in Am rica Ashok had dec ded not to buy shoes as yet be.ause I was in school and the dowry of sister Umi did not beg n to compare with that of sister Pom. Th de aluation of Indian m ney right after my leaving h me had really played havoc wi h fam ly finances Father wrot that he was working very hard to get some compen ation fo our lost home. Retirement from the Indian Government at the age

of fifty five was compulsory, although if you were absolutely indispensable, there was an extension of one year His extension would soon be up and then he would be jobless although brother Om, Usha, Ashok and myself were still in school

Everyone at home wanted to know what I was learning I could not write home that sometimes we played cards in class using French words to denote the suits pretending thus to learn a foreign language, that sometimes days would pass in a classroom without our ever reading a page I wrote only about the classes of Mr Chiles where alone we had daily homework and where the class period was spent discussing these assignments

They always received numerous clippings which appeared in the Arkansas papers telling about my every activity as though I were a precious specimen whose growth and development had special bearing on all Arkansans These clippings along with the various letters written by groups who invited me to speak on India were read by my family and many of our relatives with great satisfaction Although often I felt discouraged that the papers exaggerated my achievements and although there were times when I was quite frightened of speaking on India to groups who considered me the last authority on my country my family took the paper cuttings and the letters at face value and as testimonials of my success Whatever my fear, I could no communicate it across ten thousand miles

Even with my next-door schoolmates I had a similar difficulty in communication To them I was just another boy in his early teens who might well have spent all his childhood in those sheltered surroundings I had wanted to become one of them and within the first few weeks I was one of them but with it I had flung away the chance of having anyone to talk to about sisters Pom Nimi Umi Usha or brothers Om and Ashok or about the daily incidents on the frontiers of Pakistan and India Even though there was no outlet for my pangs of feelings about home my [illegible] was [illegible] and [illegible] ma[illegible] of sister Umi the departure of [illegible] a thousand [illegible] away [illegible] leaving ho[illegible]

I felt then even more humiliated, like a child who thinks he is grown up, but discovers he is really a baby

Later Ray told me that Mr Chiles had asked me a question, not once, but three times, and each time he had called my name Where were you, old man? Ray asked incredulously, and I could not convince him that I had heard neither the question nor my name being called I immediately went in search of Mr Chiles I found him playing the piano in the small reception room, but I could not see him because of the cluster of teachers who were gathered around the piano singing While waiting for him to finish, I was struck by the thought, What will I say to him how will I explain my mental absence from the classroom? But I stayed nevertheless and when he finished playing I stumbled through an apology, telling him that I could not find a way to explain my mental blackout I had just not heard his question The simplicity with which he accepted my apology and his own expression of regret started a lasting friendship From that day he became my confidant and interpreter of either the intricacies of American politics that I did not understand, or of what he called the American mind

Once I confided to him that the students I was meeting in the States seemed younger somehow than those in India

Ours is a young and luxurious country he said where people can afford to be children longer but on e responsibili y is forced upon them they mature very quickly One has only to see the difference in an Ameri an girl before and after marriage to understand what I mean Americans play hard but they wo k hard too

It was a favourite occupation among the boys to ma ch Mr Chiles up with one single teacher after ano h r It was invari able that whichever teacher was revered second to Mr Chiles always became his bride in the imagination of the s u l nts First it was Miss Harper then Miss Wil on and for a while even Miss Greenway As ea h of these tea hers go married and left the chool the next a tractive and mo popular tea her took her place The make believe matchmaking had I su pose n th to do wi h the wish of the s uden s to see Mr Chiles happy and

the highest happiness as Arlie used to say was to w sh a blind person marri d because it is more necessary for him to be mar ried in order to e ist fully than it is for a sighted person

Then too I suppose the students felt a sense of community with Mr Chiles because he was one of the few blind members of the faculty and the only one who was a graduate of the school He was a model fo all the students and was good ext emely good in m bility which automatically rated him h gh in the mind of the blind students Furthermore he was one of the few graduate since the foundi g of the school to go through college and e en get his M A

Not satisfied with c juring up brides for Mr Chiles how ever the speculative minds of the students had him teaching in th small pri ate colleg f om wh ch he had been graduated To be sure, a man of means like M Chiles did not have to teach at all He taught becau e he e joyed the activity of the mind

I suppose he would have approved of the air castles the students bu lt f r h m becau e he always used to talk in civics class about th Am ica beh d the headlines which he wanted to fi d an America ot shrouded by mo bid radio programmes l scandalous tabl ids Students who k ew him best knew also that his ideal wa t be m r ied and to settle in a small town and raise his fam ly in it ca efre atmosphere away from the big a d bu tling city where each good action seemed lost t him I m n t a big t me ma he used t say I just want to be happy

Miss Ha per sa d once in her cla when we we e teasi g her about M Chiles To hear y u boys and g ls talk it is as th ugh you we e daydr aming fo y ursel es and not for him Walk ng e cycl pedias ha e a hard tim of it And then she added I w uld l ke som of you to w sh aw y his nervous ess, and maybe then he w ll be marri geable

All sensiti e a d intell gent blind people a e slightly ner vous Other said It s l ke a king ne t wi h away blindness

It is so easy to dayd eam in thes p otective surr u ding Mi s Harpe went n It s l ke g tti g i to a groove and not being able to snap out of it.

But the students never stopped hoping that Mr Chiles would teach in the quiet of his small college and that some day the imagined bride would appear in real flesh and blood

Everyone on the stage was talking in hushed voices because it seemed that people had started coming into the auditorium It must not be very full I thought because I could hear the distinctive laugh of Big Jim Ernest was calling the name of a girl which I could not make out He probably wants to sit by her, I thought

I can hear Peggy, Kenneth said but Mac sniffed

She doesn t have a tongue

'Wonder if I ll ever see her again, Kenneth said pensively I wish I weren t graduating

You can t live on here for ever Mac said

Beyond the stage in the auditorium the individual voices were no longer distinguishable. It was like the sleeping hall now, multiplied manyfold

Why is everyone so sombre? Other asked abruptly

You can afford to be cheerful Mac said because at least you know a trade that you can practise

Yes Other, Annabelle said You can make enough money with piano tuning

Maybe I ll never see Peggy again Kenneth said and next year Pat will be dancing with her

Sssh Mac shushed Mr Woolly might hear you

To hear you all talk Other continued, you would turn this place into an asylum

Be quiet Kenneth said irritatedly All of us won t be able to get jobs as you will with your piano tuning

I was getting uncomfortable Mr Woolly however, came up from the other side of the podium and told us that the school had never graduated seven before Ours was the largest and the best [illegible] that he remembered Then he walked Norman over a few steps to the podium so that he might [illegible] on the [illegible] to get his diploma Norman had lost his sight late [illegible] and was very clumsy in mobility

After M Woolly left Kenneth Mac Carol and Annabelle st ll talked despairingly about leaving school Other was quiet now and I wondered if he vas rehearsing his valedictory address In my mind I ran rapidly through mv speech Board of Trustees Mr Woolly members of the faculty and frie ds Words cannot express the pleasure and honour that we the class of 1952 ha e in welcoming you to this our commencement p ogramme

I wished they hadn t made me memorize mv salutatory addre s I felt r ous that M Davi was going to be our commencement speaker I rem emb red how adamantly he had opposed my coming to the States for education And since he was the head of the Am ican Printing House for the Blind his high pos tion in educational work for the vi ually handicapped had given him power to block mv coming to America All the correspond nce was in the b ckd op of my memory and I did not ant to exhume the bu ied grievances Maybe I could have gone to Per kins maybe the they would not have played cards in the class rooms a d maybe it gr duating class would not have minded lea ing the security of school But I did not want to th ink of a y of that n w when all wa n the past I was just happy that I had been able to squeeze my ele enth and twelfth grades into one yea and wa graduating a year ahead of mv class

Othe sa d I m t afraid of leaving the school and finding my own li ing utside I feel unhappy only becau e I may never see many of my friends nd tea hers again

The rattle of the urtain ing cut him short The ceremony from beginning to end was a blur e cept when Mr Da is re fer ed to our co re ponden e La ge beads of perspiration t ckled down my back when he turned to me and publ ly acknowledg d that he Farrell and others had been dead wrong in advising me to tay home I d d not flu h with triumph a th s apology I s mply f lt mo ed by the American candour and s ncer ty in his w rds

When th ex rcise w e over all th pa ents of the gradua es came up o the small tage I tried to slip away but Other had his arm around my sh ulder The auditorium started empty g

ard so did the stage now Ducking under Other s arm I said Excuse me as though I were a child and were excusing myself from the classroom, hoping that no one would ask why You really swung it, old man, Ray said as I came out into the hallway 'Three years ago I would have bet my life that you wouldn t be graduating with us, let alone a year ahead of us

I did not blame Ray, because I recalled going into the fifth grade arithmetic class I myself expected to be a few years behind you, I said He laughed wryly Lois came up and congratulated me for getting the Stanley award, which Ray had won my first year

Mr Davis was there now It is quite an honour to have the highest scholastic average in the whole school, he said

Among the boys Ray corrected him

I had heard of the gaiety the dances and wild parties which accompanied graduation exercises but all my class mates seemed gloomy that night There would be no parties and I felt sad All the class graduates had now joined us in the hallway

Other Annabelle said your speech almost made me cry

I thought it was the most cheerful valedi tory I have heard in a long time, Mr Charles said

It was just the idea of valedictory Annabelle said I didn t even listen to him Everyone laughed but somewhat nervously, I thought

What next? Kenneth asked discouraged

playing the small organ I went in and sat down to listen to the familiar melodies When he stopped we sat down on th stage steps facing the empty auditorium and talked He told me he wanted me to go to his small college and that if I were there he would look after me like an older brother He sa d he had been hurt by the treatment I had got with my application at Columbia In big u i ersities he went on thi gs like that happen Perhaps they did happen but what would I say to my father?

Mr Chiles sa d I hould not feel bad because some universities just balked at accepting blind people, that the school had never sent stud nts East In fa t most of its students d dn t go to colleg at all and what con exions the chool did have were in Arkansas He ad ised me to go to his college major in history as he had done and then

There was no answer to the question of what to do after that. An image of Mr Chiles his hand hake his v ice his particular spee h manneri ms h s shadow itting next to me which I could perceive w th my facial vi ion passed across my mind It was hard to tell of course h w nearly my image of him corresponded to th real Mr Chil s but somehow sitting there t was not hard f r me to picture myself in hi shoes even to the slight ner ous qual ty to which Mis Ha pe had refe red He was right when he r mi ded m that the orbit of influence of any one person i l mited but l v ng in that school seemed even more lim ted It seemed l ke a elf imposed l mitati n It isn t for me I said If Columbia th nks I am not for them then I have to look elsewher

We talked some more about school and my years there but it was l ke th la t few paragraphs of a n vel who e action has already been esol d Only a few loose th eads remain to be t ed up such as what to do with the governess who brought up the hero

That n ght I had d nner with Mr Woolly He gave me a tie clasp with A S B e graved on it

Son I v ant you to have thi so that whenever you wear it people will know that you went to the Arkansas School for the

Blind You and Mr Chiles are the best graduates we have ever had

I took the tie clasp, felt the long smooth bar, the two suspended snake chains, and the pendant in the middle Mr Woolly ran my forefinger over the raised design with the A S B seal on it

You ll never forget us, will you? he said, putting it on my tie.

How could he? Mrs Woolly said We have put our seal on him

I am deeply indebted to you, I said If it had not been for you I wouldn t have got to the States at all

Mrs Woolly and the boys walked us out to the car, where there were a number of faculty members gathered I said goodbye to some of them there Others insisted they wanted to go all the way out to the airport I rode through those streets for the last time When I first arrived in Little Rock I had not been able to keep track of the direction from inside a car but now I could I could not help feeling that the most precious thing I had acquired from the Arkansas School was mobility I may not have my eyes I thought but I have the freedom of movement, a freedom of movement almost equal to that of sighted people

At the airport Mr Chiles said Who knows you might come back after the summer and go to our college after all

And Mr Woolly who had gone to the same college argued warmly for my return

I did not know then what was next for me though I knew I was outward bound I never again rode in those once familiar streets, but the warm friendships I made there all persist

TWENTY FOUR

College At Last

THE air hostess a ked us to fasten our belts From the bumpy jerks popping ear and a ki d of falling motion as when I stepp d into a manhole une pectedly I knew that in a few minutes we woul l land at the Los Angeles airport and I would see my father at last

I was eager to kn w what had happened to India in the three years I had been away When I left free India was only two years old By now probably she had lea ned to walk well and I thought c uld not o ly ask for bread but knew how and wh re to get t I had li ed through the birth pains of a nation and share l in th glo y of the independence and the shame of the part ti n only to pend three y ars in Arkansas bottled up in a pr erv j r By c m ng to America I had exchanged a position at the nerve centre of a nation for an isolated valley of the bli d without even new papers to read In many resident al schools fo th bli d they did t have readers and there were few if any Braille talking book on India

We were on the grou d now and my father was there but it wa not until we rea hed the pri acy of h s small and crowded apartment and th fri nd wl o had b ought us home left that I felt at on with him In the flow f the famil ar musical Panjabi all tl e nuances of awkwardne s and estrangeme t ani hed

I ne er was a v ry good oli player but I always liked the sou d of it When I d d not hear a violin for some time I used to g t lonely f r t but it wa hard to real ze how lon ly unt l I heard the long drawn-out ibrato n tes o ce mo e In the same way nly when I start d con ers g in Panjabi did I l ng to go back to Ind and f ll my so l with the melodic language

My father plac d h s ha ds on my sl ulders and qu tly looked at me for what seemed a long while You ve grown son,

in the last three years, he said, running his hands up and down my more developed arms Let s see, you were ninety pounds when you left home

I have put on twenty five more, I said

You look much fuller he said warmly and certainly an inch taller I wish your mother were here to see the change

But what surprised him more than my physical growth was something else It is the confident way you walked down that ramp and followed those two ladies ahead of you to the terminal He added thoughtfully It is also the way you hold your head so high

But soon, in the press of my questions about the family, all else for a moment was pushed aside

While I listened to my father talk about home I paced up and down the apartment and within a few minutes I had surveyed my narrow surroundings Father had disassembled the couch and had made two beds on the floor one on the mattress and on on the springs Books and papers were piled around and save for the narrow passageway where I paced there was hardly any room to move about I thought of the large three storey house with its abundance of rooms and I felt a pang of pain for my father This is what it had all come to this small upstairs apartment in West Los Angeles with no servants or butler to make the beds or stack the papers But memories of the old splendour were soon deposited deep in the well of the subconscious as my father read to me day in day out one old newspaper after another and passages from books which told about the surge of political and economic activity at home I felt once more as

Counting transportation five thousand dollars had been spent already twenty five thousa d *rup es* enough probably for the full education of at least two or three people in India and more than my father s annual salary even though he was one of the highest paid officials in the Indian Government The question was whether after such an expense I was any better prepared to live an indep ndent life in India th n I had been before leaving home The answer I knew was an unqualified no

My father eminded me that the training of Arkansas would count for nothi g i India Furthermo e the cherished freedom of mo ement which I had acquired would also ha e to be surrendered because in India there were no red and green l ghts no regulated traffi laws c mparable to America and the erratic *tong* men bicycl s and ox carts could not be expected to look after the inte e ts of a pede trian especially a blind one N ither was there a comparable organi ation of tr ets or blocks I could try of cou e to buck all this if I were stubborn enough but it w ld be t gh

I could n t get a job in the States because I was on a student s visa To continue t l h re I had the efo e to be a student b t wh n w ked s meo e at the Uni ers ty of California to estimate the co t of a s hool yea h gav the flat figure of three thousand dollars Ther would be the e penses f r board and *room fo tuit n* nd then I had to allow about *one thousand* dollars to pay read rs to ha e the class assignments read to me The B A degree therefore seemed not only four years but twelve th usand dollars away And my father told me that when he got hi pension it would be one hundred dollars or five hundred *upees* a month which was enough for three or four peopl to li e on in I dia leaving nothing to spare

F ve hund ed *rupee* in India ar l ke five hund ed dollars but when excha ged f r American dollars it is l ke forfeitin, four fifths of their value he told me.

As for obtaini g a y assistance from the Indian Govern ment or an Indian f undation there wa n t even an iota of a chanc becau the Indian G ernment had much more press ing problems than to look after the interests of any special

group like the blind My Arkansas diploma would not be of much weight in the scales of any foundation

But for all this my father said he would not think of my going home He would borrow money

But how will you pay it back? I asked

I will open a practice in India

But that will take lots of money I said

I will get a job here in the States then he said

But I knew that was impossible because it took Asians ten years sometimes to get into the States to become citizens And then too they had to bring some money with them to prove that they would not be public charges

Don t you worry he told me I ll manage it somehow

At night, however we both pretended to sleep I always knew when he was up and he was up a good deal of the time One time we said good night to each other at ten I did not stir at all and tried to breathe heavily pretending to be asleep At two my father without any warning broke the silence with

You ve got to look at it another way I have managed to be here in the States with you Three years ago I could never have foreseen this day I mean what with Pakistan I never thought I could afford to leave the country

Yes I said I knew the Fulbright people had paid [illegible] passage and the only reason he had come was so that [illegible] be able to see me He was forbidden to earn anything [illegible] country

I have some savings he said from the [illegible]

[illegible] I had after my return

all surrounded me All of them seemed to speak out If you can t eat your squab with a knife and fork you ll never get to college You ll never get any scholarship – no grant

As I sat next to my hosts slowly, deliberately drinking a glass of water before touching my silverware the tiny bones covered with skinlike meat seemed to be the only things between college and me Self sufficient I was but not self sufficient enough to manage the squab The old, the almost forgotten interview with Baldwin rose to my mind I could not fail my father again I picked up my fork started nibbling gradually at the wild rice and the water melon rind but carefully avoided the side of the plate with the squab One of the guests on my right offered to help me with the squab I yielded For ten minutes she worked on the squab while I sat idle hot with shame It seemed my very presence created a scene When the plate was finally returned to me there was nothing more to the squab than a few morsels of skinny meat and I gulped them down as though I were eating a vegetable I did not like rather than a very rare delicacy which should be held in the mouth to taste all its rich flavour

Dinner done I was again an exhibition piece because in the living room I had to tell the guests about my Arkansas experience For all my speaking practice my sentences were faltered and mangled and the talk was disconnected because I could not put the squab out of my mind

'You are too sensitive about these things Father said as we went home You overdramatize them

Perhaps I did but I wondered how a surgeon would feel who had performed many operations successfully but botched one right in full view of the operating theatre If the gallery of watchers had no knowledge of his past successes would he not be judged by that operation alone ?

A few days later however a grant for two years fifteen hundred dollars a year was confirmed and at last I could begin my college career Although [illegible] my college career [illegible] States by special arrangement [illegible] Calif [illegible] [illegible]

to t ll him that or how to explain it I will as soon as I get one, sr I guess within my soul I still hoped that people watching me cross the street would realize I could do it without a cane and would stop talking to me about it

About a week later he stopped me again The dean called m he said and he s afraid you will get killed I hate to keep on bringing up this subject, but your cane

In those two weeks since I had been at Pomona I had crossed College Way at least four times a day but still the question of a can seemed to persist

I will not carry it sir I said

If you are hy about it he went on kindly just use it while you are crossing streets and then hide it under bushes before coming to class

I am not ashamed of being blind I said moved deeply by his sensitivity That s written over me in larger letters than any cane could ever write It s just that I don t need the cane

Whether it was my facial expression or his own sensitivity h never mentioned the subject again but the dean once accosted m in the middle of the quadrangle

Why won t you carry that cane? he asked You ll get ill d

Trying to dismiss the subject with humour I aid Death only come once and I am not afraid of dying

It might come once but on e is enough to kill me Ho bout you? he asked wryly

In cafeteria lines i was like meeting o many hundreds of

than writing with pencil Coming from the Arkansas School, where I had to write scarcely more than two pages of theme every two or three months, organizing and writing papers sometimes twice a month for a class was difficult For all the accumulated handicaps, I could not afford to go to a professor and explain that I had no readers, or excuse my bad work because of my poor background I could not afford to create the impression that any part of my problem was related to my blindness Above all, I wanted to be treated as normal

In my room I could not go to sleep I used to turn my phonograph on at full blast and listen to the blurred music wondering if I would get my grant for the next year or if I would have to go home Sometimes in the middle of the night I would get out of bed take the first bicycle standing without a lock and ride up and down the empty familiar streets stealthily because I wanted privacy I would pedal hard and would come home tired, and even then I could not always fall asleep

As the months progressed, however I started losing less and less sleep over my work, because it started improving and I got assurance that I would have enough money to see me through college I banished worry for inner quietude and relaxation and I perfected my technique of getting readers Professors would point out to me their best students and I would approach them either at the dinner table or at the student union about reading our assignments together I found that students working their way through college were more reliable. I also used as fill in some elderly readers that the dean who had by now become a good and resourceful friend referred me to Even before the first semester was over I had about a ten hour a day reading schedule After my rigorous reading schedule I still would not be tired and would come home to read whatever literature I could find on talking books Gradually I started cutting my sleep from the nine hours I had had in Arkansas to [illegible] six [illegible] occasionally even five

My acquaintance [illegible] better [illegible] tured and [illegible] solid train[illegible] [illegible]

because of his unique personality, after the memorable character in *Huckleberry Finn* The Dauphin s opinion itself would not have carried much weight if it did not reflect the gamut of noto ious misconceptions about my having some sight or being blessed with some supernatural power or perception which persists among the people who should know better

a street corner or sitting at a counter, or the kind driver whose ... you can hear coming faster and faster while you wonder ... hether he will pass you by like the one before him or stop You ... member vividly the moment when a car slows down, and a ... e says, Hey, feller – want a ride? or Where are you ... ing? or Can I give you a lift? And when you come to the ... d of the journey often the driver, who is now a friend, insists ... getting out and helping you flag down the next relay

Sometimes my hitch hiking has turned into a circus I re member, for instance, a kind elderly lady who was genuinely dis ressed with my parents not taking better care of me and letting me out on the streets like a vagabond In a wayside pla e in Texas under the pretence of taking me to a gas station to ca ch the next ride, she turned me over to a police deputy wi h a bli tering harangue that I was probably a runaway state ward and if the Democrats had been in power I would have received better care I was irritated until after she drove off, the deputy told me that she had left twenty dollars with him for a train ticket to take me back to Washington We had a lively d ussion about what to do with the money and finally decided to end it to the Democratic campaign fund The deputy then took me to a petrol station where I caught my next rid

Som where I also have tucked away the card of a cutlery sal man who thought my blindness would be a terrifi as in alesmanship So if you ever get in a jam he said in that thi k Southern accent come to me I kept the card as a souvenir After all he did take me two hundred miles All the a veria ions sometimes embarrassing ometim s touching make the [illegible] of those of us who a e blind

I was disappointed, but what else was there to do?

You see, there was a man, crippled – no let s say lazy – and he was sitting with another man who was going to a john and the lazy man told the other man to go for him too And being kind hearted, as he was, he consented When he came out the lazy man asked this man if he had done what he had told him

Well,' the man who had gone to the toilet said, you see after I went, you didn t need to go any more He laughed at his own joke I felt crushed

You see how it is in this game? Each man for himself, he said

A wrong card, I thought to myself

You remind me of Sam, he said with an air of finality

But Sam who had listened too didn t say anything I could not let it go at that I had hid my innermost feelings many times before Iranians and Indians I said are friends from old historic times

Thank you Sam said and only then was I glad that I had coupled myself with him

Simon you re cruel Sam said reproachfully

I ll try Simon said but one man s meat is another man s poison Besides the trouble with Ved is that he looks too much like a walking encyclopedia

I couldn t contain myself any more Like hell I do I said

Being new in a university where no one knew me at all I found it hard to get readers I asked the professor if he would make an announcement in my class which was four or five times the size of any at Pomona that there was a blind student who would like his assignments read and who would be willing to pay seventy five cents an hour But he [illegible] in such an [illegible]

[illegible] all through each class I was [illegible]

people who can read aloud more than two hours a day And besides you still have to put in your hours at the grocery store on Sundays'

She would not hear of it, and once or twice, when she read to me late at night I walked her to her dormitory And this was the beginning of our warm relationship

She had thick hair, a slight and slender body a round mouth, and a mellow alto voice which always sounded fresh and alive and which reflected the modulation of her emotions amazingly accurately Her laugh was subdued but full and she walked as though she had no weight at all Whether we were at concerts the theatre, movies or restaurants she always knew how to conduct me without an iota of embarrassment There was, of course, nothing hard about directing a blind man because it was I who escorted her not vice versa All she had to do was place her hand firmly in mine, and when walking through crowded aisles, not get nervous She allowed me to order for her open doors, help her off buses and let me walk her home as anyone else would

When we were on a day s outing together and went into a restaurant for lunch or dinner she would say sweetly Wash up me and would explain to me from the table the twists and turns so well that I could walk directly towards the room without using a scene

taking out He was terribly agitated a state unsuited for a first meeting although quite in order for a bridegroom He stopped scouting around for girls in the dining room and at next to me as though to show his gratitude I started wondering if I should have meddled in it at all since Sam wouldn t give me any peace Simon repeatedly insisted that he wanted to see Sam s date Just to size her up he said because Sam wasn t a connoisseur as he was He decided he would take his girl to the play also, just to appraise the object of Sam s agitation

When the night finally arrived everything went off all right Sam and I picked up the girls and it seemed to me that Sam liked his date, because they talked easily After the play however, when Simon came to size her up he whispered something possibly his judgement to Sam After that everything was miserable There were awkward pauses and dead silences in the car Syl and I could do nothing to make the wheels turn smoothly I dreaded a moment alone with Sam so when the evening was over, I stayed a while longer with Syl

The next morning at breakfast however poor Sam was the butt of it all She looks exactly like a sheep Simon said and Simon s girl friend was laughing at his description of Syl s room mate

He doesn t look too much better than a goat himself you know she whispered to me You really matched them well

One man s meat is another man s poison Ved Simon said and then ... You should know better than to ask a blind

and pressed it, but it ached Syl was flanked by the girls, and I sat on the aisle seat I did not follow the movie at all When it was over I tried to get beside Syl and have a word with her but her friends were talking to her about the movie Again with the girls leading we started walking back towards the dormitory John was on the street side this time and held me fast

The reason no one has asked about my forehead I thought is because one of the girls put her finger to her lips I felt as isolated from the group as though they were talking not with words but with gestures and to divine their meaning one had to see the movements of their hands No matter how well trained one was in mobility, how well adjusted to a seeing society there were always some lamp posts left out of one s calculations

I wished they would change the topic of conversation from the movie to something else so that I might stop appearing like a chided, sulking child But nevertheless I yielded to a trance of reverie the way a man in a trench overpowered by odds surrenders himself to private reflections

When I pulled myself together and entered into the conversation it seemed John had persuaded the girls to go on an all night hike with him They were to sign in at Syl s dormitory and then slip out the window It was all so unlike Syl

While you girls are doing that John said I ll walk Ved to the International House

He ll come with us Syl said but not a single one of her

I thought about Sam and his bald head He felt lonely because he was going on thirty and away from home there was no one to lo e him or for him to love Simon was away from home too and like Sam he ne er wanted to return But I was different from them both because I wanted to go home I wondered how many Sams there vere – blundering Sams who had bald heads or looked like goats or could not walk straight because they tried to forget their loneliness by drinking

As I approached T legraph A enue I heard the long drawn out muffled notes of a iolin They were distant and hard to place but they pe sisted l ke the mellifluous melodies played on a flute late at night which I had heard so often at Murree Hills Those mu ical flights of simple mountaineers seemed in nocent compared to th subtle and rich notes of the violin

I was ab ea t of the cafe a few people we e gathered around its door It was clear that the violinist was inside

What is it? I asked stirred by the music

A beautiful girl is playing a violin someone answered after a pause

Another comm nted She practises every night after the cafe closes

No o e ca go in? I a ked

The doo is sh t I h ard

I stood apart f om the group clustered around the door By and by they left but the iol n was still being played Maybe they ll let me in I thought si ce I am alone n w and I knocked at the pane first gently and then hard and f antically but it d d no mo e than j st d turb th music for my ears At that mo m nt, Syl seemed as unattainable as the violinist I could come and l sten to her play tom r ow and the day after but the yesterday of Syl and m was gone There was no reasonable *explanation for it* but I knew her friends had brought with them an impercept ble change a change as looming and solid as the lamp-post

I stood at the door for at least an hour longer until the vi lin was put away A d then w th my head hung low and the hands of my watch pointing to the early h u s of the morning I

s arted walking tow ards International House uncon cious of all my surroundings

H-y, there I heard from behind me, but I kep on moving a' the same pace

You there, stop! the man shouted again I did not turn around, but simply waited for the intruder to come abreast.

You are drunk, the voice said militarily

What is it to you? I said starting to move away

The intruder gripped my arm hard and I felt too low spiri ed to either struggle or be angry In a moment the poli eman wa apologizing profusely I thought sir you were drunk I didn t know We are no supposed to he continued but I would like to give you a ride.

I was too weak to decline He drove me to International House in his secure police car

A few months later, as I was going out through the door next to the mural I nudged K's shoulder and stopping to apologize, I fell into conversation with him He had been viewing the mural intently, and standing there, he explained to me pensively the meaning to him of the portrayed figure and the torch Although it was hard for me to visualize the image at all I was impressed by K's thoughtfulness in taking the time to explain something which, all during the months I had been there, no one else had At last Prometheus who brought the torch of knowledge and made men out of clay became alive for me This was also my introduction to K who as the time went on became my fast friend

Although I never got a single connected story about K's background, in snatches sometimes from him sometimes filtered through his Japanese friend Kaz I did come to have a good [illegible]on of his past He was a Nisei and many times he felt con[illegible]ting loyalties to the Japanese and American cultures Through [illegible] rigorous training by his mother in Buddhism and in the [illegible]h tradition of his culture he had come to know Japan well [illegible]hough at second hand All his life he had lived in a comm[illegible] [illegible]y which was segregated from the Americans and in which [illegible] he used to say my people try to make a little model of Japan [illegible] never liked to talk about the years he had been forced [illegible] [illegible]end in a relocation camp after Pearl Harbour except to explain [illegible] long gap in his education Sure we had classes he told me [illegible] out in the open but we never did very much We [illegible]uldn't Child that I was I used to think the Americans would [illegible]

? i into my pocket so that I won t feel embarrassed In Japan would never accept money like that from a sister

Wh ther because of these conflicting allegiances or because th suffering he had seen around him in the camp of which never spoke, K was a very lonely man Kaz and I were his y friends and even to us he never revealed his inmos ughts When occasionally he asked a girl out and she did go with him one way or another we would find out

asked him once why he did not ask girls out more often it way, I said, the law of averages would be in your our

I don t know why, he soberly replied and then added For reason I would just as soon sit by my window and look at girls below and listen to their laughter from the swimming l They seem so distant from me

liked America and realized that had he lived in Japan would probably never have gone as far as college wi h the ins his family had In this country he could wo k and go to ge at the same time Here people instead of looking down bour, value it he said and although now and then h felt d that he could not always get the jobs he wanted or even a to live in because he was a Jap – that is he looked nese – he didn t bear any grudge against Am ri a fo tha bably if the Japane e were in America s hoes he used to they would be much mo e cru l to non Japanese

Yes I said you can cross all frontiers

He vanted to work for better Japanese American relations only if I ha e the capacity of mind he used to say modestly He was never gi en to overconfidence in himself probably be cause he wa so uncertain a to who he really was My back g ound he eminded me is Japanese but my education Am erican *American because he never took courses in Japanese* culture or Buddhism H studied only Western civilization

Of all his h tory teache he liked Dr Meyer best Meyer s speciality as m de n German and ent al European history and this mad him unusually sen itiv to the question of minor ities

H knows K said once to me when to aise and when not to aise the question – I mean about the Japanese American problem – v th m and also ho to do it

Du ing h seni r y ar K frett d a l t about graduate school Ther were only a f w sen o s in his departme t that year Two *of them got fell wships to go abroad or East* but K *did not* The only feasible ffe he g t was f m the Claremont Graduate School which off ed to pay h tu tion but board and room ere still a problem He appl ed to the dean for a resident hip Aft r the inter i w with the dean he said I just couldn t ommun cat th h m Wo ds came out but feelings and re pons did not I j t d dn t seem to belong to his office

All interview go badly I told K Don t worry you ll get it

But it took Mey s firm support to get him the job He was all s t for another y ar

He ent home and told h m ther One more year and I ll *be on my feet Then I ll be teachi g s hool and I ll take care of* you Ma

L t he he st rt d inquiring aro d ab ut teaching job some of the p ofessors at graduate school d couraged h m They sa d it would b ha d to place a Japan se American in a high school e en with h s good reco d and his teaching cred ntials K started worrying again

My mother he said just can t work more than another year

Meyer gave him another boost K you have a good mind he J Teach in college There you won t meet with any preju e, and I ll help you get fellowships to see you through

H came home and told me that Meyer was a wonderful guy h has that much faith in me he told me I won t disap- n him

K graduated *cum laude* in 1954 He felt sad that Meyer was ng to be away the following year on a leave of absence, and roubled him that he was already twenty four years old and a Ph D was such a big gamble Although the fellowships ht make him independent the time required for the degree ld prevent him from helping his mother But all these fears put aside temporarily amidst the enthusiasm of his family it his graduation His mother was glad that her son had a degree from an American college and his sisters proud use they, too, had worked and helped put K through school American mother wrote to him that all her confidence in K was completely justified

The next year, however when he re urned to school the conflict between getting a Ph D or a tea hing certifi a e contin u d He had an obligation to Meyer and him If bu he al o had an obligation to his mo her He to l me that year b o e the Thanksgiving vaca ion I have done som thing very wr ng I haven t told my mo her tha I much g on fo the Ph D Sh s expecting me to be through next year I don t kn w h o to g about telling her

handsomely But at the end K paid the bill I knew you wouldn t feast a well if I told you I would pay he said I struggled and I argued b t it was he who took the cheque

K had already begun to rite his M A thesis because he anted s methi g in place of the certificate to show his mother He wished he c uld rk on the mino ity problem but since Meyer as away he cho e the topic The Idea of Progress In the es ay h want d t show the change in the conception of prog ess bet veen the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries He was o erwhelm d by the mate ial he had to read The l brary he t ld me i like a forest I don t know where to begin I could ad for the rest of my life and still not get it all in

As soon as he sta ted w t ng he sta ted fretting Many a t me I found h m itti g at hi typewriter in a small cubi le in th old d rm to y wh e he was forced to l ve because of his assistant hip hammering away at sheet after sheet He would w te a page wo ldn t l ke it and would th ow it away O e p ge he vrote at lea t t enty times a d still he wasn t happy with t

Lea it K I t ld him Go a ay for a couple of days to a beach o the mountains Just go away from this room and f om this typew ite

But he kept on with it doggedly He started saying I am a mo n t fit for anything

At last he had the fi st draft of his thesis completed One prof so told him that hi style didn t run smoothly enough probably becau e t had been worked o er too much Another vaguely int mated th t perhap K should think about high school teachi g q te ser u ly I heard the whole es ay th ough and tried to help him with the structure here and there The deadl n was May 2.

K I said why don t you get an exte sion?

He blew up You don t think much f my intellect ei her do you?

That was the last thing on my mind I said I just wanted you to have a little bit more time to think about t

He ran out of my room But he called me a few minutes later to say he was sorry

When the spring vacation came, I asked K bluntly about what I had hinted at so many times I have come to know your mother and sisters so well through you Why haven t you introduced me to them as yet?

Because – and he stuttered – I am ashamed of the way we have to live I couldn t let you see our house Besides we are so poor My my mother

I protested I pleaded Do you think that *matters*? I asked I told him about my own parents and how we had had to live after the partition, but there was nothing I could do to dissuade him and I could not very well invite myself to his house

I hoped he would come back from the vacation refreshed but he returned even more troubled The day I went home I saw my mother picking onions in the field Just think picking onions eight hours a day And here I am the only man in the family, doing nothing

They probably love to sacrifice for you K I said but he could not take it that way

I am caught he said in the choice between further education and my duty to my mother

And I knew already which of the two worlds had won

Gleason will understand, I said assuredly He a very understanding man There was a pause K I said give me your word that you will call Gleason right after you hang up and get the deadline extended He hesitated Promise me I insisted

If you say so I will he said I want to see you very badly May I come over now?

Without thinking I said My father is here I'd like very much to have you meet him Let's arrange to have dinner together I waited for a response K are you there?

Yes he said huskily and all of a sudden I felt guilty for putting him off I guess that's all he said then definitively

I will come by tomorrow I said and then we can make arrangements for our dinner together I reminded him about his promise to get the deadline extended and we hung up

Twice the next day I went over to his room but he wasn't there His bed was littered with papers the wastepaper basket was full of them also I took a paper out of the wastepaper basket and started to type him a note to call me as soon as he got back But there was a page in the machine already [illegible]

That night I left my father at the inn and went to the college to pick up some clothes and to see K This was [illegible] since I had known him except for the summer and Christmas vacations that we had not seen each other [illegible]

K had been a light to me. And even the light of this lamp earned now, had been shaded, obscured, only to be shrouded [illegible] ever. To live, one had to form meaningful human relationships, but how did one lift the shade and look into the glare? [illegible]ople did live, certainly, knowing friends as though they were [illegible] so many faces in ticketed theatre seats, but I wanted something more, something as elusive as light to blind eyes, but as warm and certain as the full glow of the sun.

Ved, my father called, if you ever feel completely licked – and I listened – promise me one thing.

He paused for answer, but I could not even bring out, What?

Promise that you will write to me first to pour out your heart and then wait for my answer before you finally act.

For me this was a big thing to promise, but not to my father.

I promise, I said. Then from the heavy breathing I could tell my father was asleep, but I still wondered how long he would be there to receive my letter, and what after him.

The next morning K's mother and sisters came to [illegible] him, and although I wanted to see them very much I did not, because I respected his decision.

After a week my father left for Europe and I was back in circulation. People came up to me and warmly expressed their sorrow, as though I were K's blood relation. One said he wanted to write a poem in K's memory. Another remarked, I could have been any one of us. And another told me how the night before K shot himself, when everyone [illegible] room, he had stood before the damned mirror [illegible] and I had [illegible]

was only the coating of the real problem of wanting time: time for reflection, for just ruminating – above all, for developing my sensibilities as a human being. By no means did I wish to stop reading or give up education. My predilections towards history, literature and philosophy were as strong as ever. I simply wanted to study these subjects in my own time and in my own way, without any deadlines.

By the end of May, however, the finals began, and I suffered through them with that last bit of energy which a child has when he is lost in the woods and is trying hard to find his way home. After I turned in my last exam to my contemporary [illegible] professor, he wished me a good summer. 'You should have a lot of time to think this summer,' he said. 'Remember, there is a difference between being sensitive and weak and being sensitive and strong.'

I left Pomona without giving the registrar a stamped envelope for my transcript. I started on a leisurely trip to the East Coast to spend my summer at Harvard to study literature and writing. There I passed the summer reading and taking long, tiring walks. The summer gave me time to try my hand at some short stories and to start listening all around me for human situations. It appeared that people did a very good job of hiding their traumas, and often my imagination read more into situations than really existed. Nevertheless, the few short stories were good [illegible] unleashing my imagination, and the literature [illegible] some of my lost vitality. When I [illegible] the [illegible] and headed towards California, I was really [illegible] chisel and hammer to [illegible] upon the [illegible] again.

She was never on time for dates so whenever we went to concerts or plays I used to arrive early at the house where she lived with three other girls While she dressed upstairs humming a folk tune as though she were in a timeless world I would wait for her with a heavy heart because I thought she was used to boys telling her how well she looked But when she ran down the steps and greeted me as though she had been thinking about me the whole day in her full presence all my trepidations fled

You know she said once coming down the stairs I think you may not know how I look but you know how I feel That's much more important I felt glad I bet you even know how I look on a particular day don't you? she said suspensefully

She is human after all I thought to myself It would have taken so little effort for me to say yes except where facts about blindness were concerned I was scrupulously honest

No I said

Then we'll pretend you do know she said cheerfully and it was like receiving a shot of adrenalin She seemed to me at that moment life itself life which I had wanted for a long long while but which until now I had never met

We'll pretend then if you like I said and hand in hand with a light step we walked out

One evening after we had known each other a month she said to me I think we are going too fast I [illegible] that [illegible] she went on We do things together but I don't know [illegible]

I am one of tho e people she pursued who has to have faith to be al v

It was true for it was hard to conceive of Mary without rel gion

I can t understand how anyone can be without it she per sisted

I left he id and walked to the window Mary it does no good talking about it I said I am if you like still searching I have no answ and I am not sure I am in a position to make any comm tme ts as yet

But I wo de he went on if you ever will You talk as though it i an act to belie e in God You just think too much

I flung the wind w wide open and let in a draught It mu t be t o or th ee n the morning I thought.

Come here and it beside me she said and I did I could not be close to anyone, he observed who I thought was re jected by God the Christian God

Do y u eally think Mary I asked that there is no salva tion outside Ch t anity?

Yes he sa d as fa as I know

It a the fir t time he had qualified h r y s You ve chan g d I sa d if you can admit that much

I am willing to hange for you she said but only so far

I wouldn t want you to change You re good very good I said but you hav to under tand me too

H w can I und rstand? Do I e er argue about who my father is? Th n how can I about God?

What struck me was the simplicity of her faith yet I was su. her m ldnes and quietud even peace the very qualities which had att acte l m to her were eng ndered by it I could ha e argued then a I had befo e v ith her and pointed out the s m plicity of her belief but it eemed to me useless

Mary I said let s dec de never to talk about religion

We have to she said for my peace of mind Otherwise we can t go n like this.

It was like c nfr nt ng a gla s of wine fill d to the brim In order to drink it I had to l ft it and clumsy as I was, I k ew in

bringing it to my lips I would spill some of the precious contents, and I could not afford to lose a single drop

Mary, we are happy together, I said, except when we talk about religion. I took her hand in mine. It was perspiring. Don't deny me, Mary, something I've really had for the first time, I pleaded. You don't know how much all this means to me.

She came closer.

As I walked home that night, the air smelled of rain, and before I reached my room it had begun to drizzle mildly. I was happy that the night had not ended badly, as it usually did when we talked about religion. But I also knew that for all our closeness we could not reach each other as long as we talked on different levels.

A change, gradual and subtle, almost imperceptible, had come over our relationship since the night we had talked about religion. It was hard to say when, where, or how it had come about. Maybe it was the day we had an argument about D[illegible] K[illegible]'s editorials in the college paper. Although I agreed with her that D[illegible] K[illegible] was a cynic to his teeth, I liked what he wrote and I always found occasion to be amused by the little M[illegible] of our campus. [illegible] disliked him intensely because he wasn't good and wrote about bad things.

a bad taste in my mouth because in a sense she seem d to repre sent to me all that was good and kind and affectionate in this wo ld and yet the very na veté for which I criticized her wa the underpinning of her character

Ba ed o what e eason o sentiment it was appa ent to both of us that the relationship was l ing its savour She started g g ut w th Bud who ang in the glee club and was a mem ber of a powerful social fraternity The boys teased him about call g up girl h h d not even met and telling them that he was the handsome t boy in the chool therefo e they should go out with h m Bud was often at Mary s pla e and I could no l ge just walk i All South n ge tl men she said teasingly call before th y come A d if he wa there wh n I called she would say simply I hav company now Why do t you call back late ? Som time when I w th e and Bud v ould tele phone sh w uld all him Ved a d then he wo ld double over w th l ught r a d emba ra m nt

Once she t ld me about cor esponding with two boys who in the Na y Suppos ng y u h d a choice between those two hom would you hoo e? she a ked

Desc ibe th m to m I sa d a d he did colourfully With a smile I a k d Choose for what?

F marriage

I considered with a se air and then al ghting upon one ma shalled all th facts t m ke him attract v

Oh she said you are playing games with me

No I said I am in earnest

You bo e me Y u talk as though I we e buying a house not pi k g a man to marry

That s the way thing are done n India I sa d gravely

She blew up What s the matter with you? Aren t you ever jealous? Don t you ca e about me at all? To my utter amaze ment she wept whil I sat helple s cl m ily putting my hand kerch f up to her face

She muttered You don t ca e you do t ca e

Oh but I do I sa d consolingly but I know my place. I reflected tha if it was a good t me she wa ted sh could ha e a

much better time with Bud than she ever could with me He could take her to parties banquets and dances of his fraternity and whenever I was with Mary I preferred her all to myself

What do you really think of me? she asked probing me

I pondered the searching question You are for me I said the soul of America to the *n*th degree You are friendly you are kind you are generous, and above all you accept me as I am

I don t want speeches she said and drying her eyes with my handkerchief she moved closer to me

Mary put both her hands on my arm I could literally feel her gaze

You are joking you aren t serious she exclaimed

I am in earnest I said with I knew a broad smile playing on my face

Why didn t you tell me? We would have had a party, and a birthday cake and if you wanted twenty two candles

Oh come I said that s much too many for a cake

I would have made one myself large as a tray Let s call up Jean and Jack and Nicholas and David and have a real party

I don t want a party I just want to be with you I said

She ran into the kitchen and I followed her Oh it s so empty she said I don t have anything here at all

Let s have cinnamon toast and coffee like we always do I said

She found a napkin with Happy Birthday [illegible] on it and a few candles from the Christmas [illegible] She made cinnamon toast and [illegible] the candles on the top [illegible]

I like you better than anyone, for all our differences?

I do I said

Then in an almost excited tone, Let s love each other in a special way We ll pretend we are completely alike There is no difference between us We agree on everything everything

A game? I asked swallowing hard

No at all but a way of really finding ourselves Let s pretend everything is really all right

Let s I said and I took both her hands in mine and tried to get used to her complete reality to her beautiful Southern drawl and her gentle and soft voice

Let s never talk about Dick she begged

Let s not I said under the complete spell of life itself I got up and put my arms around her

When I walked home that night late Mary seemed to me Rawalpindi home and yet much more In my mind he was that violin player in the small café on Telegraph Avenue But this time he had opened the door and had not only greeted me warmly but served me coffee and held my fumbling hand in his long fingers and warm palm

season would have a more solid prop because it would not be founded on the quicksand of pretence Yet however solid the prop of tomorrow and even though it might support a relationship more mature it would be deficient in the sensation of a first full experience a new discovery

Epilogue

WAS graduated in June with the class of 1956 and soon there-
ter took to the broad highway to the East Coast on the first leg
my journey to England I felt sad because before the summer
son was up the huge American continent would be behind
e I had come to love America almost as deeply as home and
owed more to her than I did to India because she had given me
ucation freedom of movement a complete sense of self
liance and a glimpse into what a full life could be in the
sons of Syl and Mars All these things my own country had
t been able to do because I was blind
Among the very best people I had met in the country were

and Amer can educatio and both of them because I as blind O ce again t s a an Ame ica source a ourc sim lar to those that h d seen m through fou years of college which ci cum e ting technical ground decided to support me at Balliol College

As I sa d good by to my f ie ds in California T xas Ten nes ee a d Ma yla d th y all pl ad d for my return to America Th se fr end ith g n ro entiment suggested that I settle i Ameri a stead f et rn ng home by way of England They arg d that here I uld fi d a fulle and richer life and if settled in a u iv ity commu ity I could forget altogether the preju d e about bli d s a d ma y of the day to-day irksome rem nd s hich n handi app d man is allowed to escape

L i g Am i a n lluring prospect for me i so ma y p actical way the fre d m of mo ement in contrast to India s tr et h h a poo ly f at all regulated by traffic la s and l ght th b lity of eader whi h ill be a great problem for me n In l a (t alm t impo sible to u derstand Hegel Aristotle an l El t f vo r r d does not comprehend as ell) And I shall l mi th int llectual timulati n f d scu n the great tra l ti of Engl h and Amer can philosophy and letters ith th

But l could I i d l my lf to thi extent when I have su h d m mo f bo j as i g their y uthful ye rs in an asylum a d men l om n committed to the drudgery of begg be ause h i the ly good use they can make of th ir bl dn s ? How c ld I j t fy g ing up a larg r and m re r w di g au u h lf h grou ds?

With th Pa ifi h line rece ling and the Atlanti Coast loomi g ahead I th ght about England and my 'ecis n to spend two o th e y at O fo d eading hi t ry b f e mak in my ay t the In l i Ocea I had pl nty of mi g ings duri g the t me I wa m ki g this deci ion Ho e er muc l I argued that the two y a Oxford would f irther fortify my education allow me l i ure to read a d eflect at my own pa and give me m r tim t mature I co l l not h lp a k n my self hether all th s was n t rat nal zation wh ther I was

dreading returning to India because I had become too Americanized whether this postponement of two years might not ultimately result in my returning to America to live

Yet against all of these practical arguments I can place my strong love for and devotion to India My return there constitutes both a challenge and a responsibility It seems to me that I have acquired a human debt to my professors to the people who have educated me in American ways and this debt can at least be partially repaid if I return home to help solidify the bonds of friendship between these nations

Aside from this debt there is the memory of Sohan daring and brave, who offered his life for his burning conviction I owe it to his memory and to the memory of others like him sacrificed to an unwise division of a nation and the betrayal of an ideal of peace and non violence to go home soon and to try not so much to undo history but to help guide it in however small a way on a more calm and peaceful course Perhaps going to England is rationalization but looked at in another way it [illegible] seems a logical route for heading home I really want to come to know those Englishmen to whom Sohan [illegible] Nimmi and I [illegible]

reminded me locked in a struggle for industrial revolution has use only for professional people, preferably with technical skills

The ambassador from India who had been visiting in Los Angeles some months before my departure pointed out to me that I would not be allowed to take either the civil or diplomatic servi e examination because the Indian Government felt that blind persons could not hold jobs with the same degree of com petency as the sighted

Do you thi k there is any chance for a change in its atti tude? I asked him

I think not he said

As for ente ing college teaching or a journalistic career simi lar handicaps e i t in India because no blind person has been able to pull himself up from the mesh of notoriously bad educa t onal facilities fo the bli d and hold a top-flight job Those bli d indi idual who have succeeded have either taken up a law practice or gone into education for the blind But then another good natu ed Indian told me Lawyers are starving in India and unles you are absolutely sure you want to be nothing l e in your l fe except a lawyer I would not advise y ur going into it

As f r educatio al wo k for the blind at home I cannot help feeling that working through bureaucracy is not the only way to h lp the w tched lot of the two mill on so handicapped What is needed is a living example that if given the proper oppor tunities the blind can succeed Such an example from the out side can do much more in creating opportunities than bucking the r d tape or being another selfless Mr Chiles in the Dadar School

All these handicap are negl gible when placed against the tremendous ob tacle of correcting the attitude which looks upon blindne as a puni hment inflicted by the gods for a sin com m ted in th p ev ous incarnatio In a country where ma y people hold that blindness is a cu se all the accompl hments all the signs of a successful adjustm nt to a seeing society would count for little Having enjoyed a more understanding less superstitious, and certainly mo e e lucated attitude here in

America, I ask myself, can I conceivably return to such a deadening climate? Can I rely ultimately on my love and devotion for India to sustain me there in such an atmosphere until a signal change can be brought about which, heaven knows, might not come in my lifetime at all?

As I prepare to leave for England I am surrounded by cartons full of books and records, two vices to which I have given free play in the last seven years. Each familiar cover of a book encloses not only a fund of knowledge but a fond memory of the readers whose tireless efforts made these books come alive for me. The great history of Thucydides conjures up Ann; Goethe and Joyce, Albert; Plato and T. S. Eliot, Eugene. The records have their similar associations. The album of *Don Giovanni* brings the image of Dick beside me in the auditorium, and Bach's B minor Mass, JoAn.

As I pack these books and records in boxes with a musty smell, they seem like so many fond treasures given to me by America. I should feel sadder and lonelier without these gifts and without a hope that I shall hear and feel American life again, for now America is as much my home as any place in this footloose world. But my taking leave is made easier because as I look towards the island across the Atlantic, even now there is a plane approaching [illegible] coming to meet me. For the first time [illegible] we shall meet and I shall hear her voice [illegible] with the unmistakable accents of home.

Publisher's Note

After completing this book in 1956 at the age of twenty-two, Mr Mehta went up to Oxford, where he spent three years and took a degree in Modern history, and then, following a summer in India, he went on to Harvard, where he continued his studies for a year and a half longer. Since 1961 he has been a staff writer on *The New Yorker*. In addition to *Face to Face* he has written *Walking the Indian Streets* (1960), a travel book about India and Nepal; *Fly and the Fly Bottle* (1963), a report on contemporary philosophers and historians in England; *The New Theologian* (1966), a report on Christian thinkers in England, the United States, Switzerland and Germany; and *Delinquent Chacha* (1967), a comic novel about a middle-aged Indian, set in India and England. A publisher's note that was included in the English edition of his second book, *Walking the Indian Streets*, read:

Glossary

ACHKAN A long coat for men with a high buttoned collar
AGNI Fire
ALU-CHHOLE Potato and chick peas cooked in a pungent sauce
BAHAN Sister

BANIA Trader or shopkeeper see Caste.
BARAT Bridegroom's party
BHABI Mother or grandmother
BHAIRO A scale pattern in music.
BIBI A lady wife
BIRI Cigarette
BOW CATTA A cry following victory in a late battle
BRAHMAN See Caste

a [illegible] many adopted words of Persian and Arabic) is [illegible] northern India and is understood by a popular [illegible] of the United States Hindi has been [illegible] Government to become the national language

LATHEE Heavy stick bound with iron.
LUSSI Buttermilk.

MALI Gardener
MARATHI See Languages.
MELA A fair held in connection with a religious [illegible]
MILNI Ceremony of introduction [illegible] marriage [illegible] of bride and groom
MISTREES Skilled Laborers.
MULLAH Muslim preacher

NAMASTE [illegible] I [illegible] down to [illegible]

OM SHANTI SHANTI [illegible]

DELINQUENT CHACHA

V d Mehta

I th am f St G rge St Andrew St Da id and St Pat k the b w t h g p tro sa nts of o r rstwhile rul s, I gr t yo And who w uld n t eturn the greeti g f De l nquent Chach Esq Ind ge tl man of m y words and f w possess ns eckless d eam fer ent bel ever in the O F d ed cation to wh h h s fath m ble intellect w s ever e pos d dom table r l of th Briti h Raj co n isseur f ma ers and eve t al comm ssion e of the All I di T j Mah l C rry Chutn y d Soup Resta ant in Lond

A A gl m a whom wayw d fat ha br ught to th land of h l ng pas and who o e there is first bedecked with im gi ry ho ours d th n p opelled head l g into th law urts D l nque t Cha ha s om c char ct o ly alut a h l tes Her Grac s Majesty The Quee vith tw fi gers f the left h nd n th f h d a d a l w bow from the w ist

Not for l th U S A o C d